In the spring of 2011, the Alberta Liberal Party (ALP) introduced a “registered supporter” system in conjunction with novel electronic (online and telephonic) voting mechanisms for its upcoming leadership race. Supporters of these systems viewed them as innovations that would revive the party ahead of a looming general election. This chapter explores the nature of the ALP’s e-voting system as it was agreed upon, institutionalized, and operated within the context of a partisan leadership race in which non-fee-paying “registered supporters” and fee-paying ALP members constituted the voter pool. The “registered supporter” and e-voting mechanisms introduced to the ALP in 2011 were promoted by a small cohort of party insiders whose explicit intention it was to attract a broad base of support throughout the province. The electoral failures of the ALP a year later in the general election—which witnessed the party lose seats, popular support, and status as the province’s Official Opposition—put both new systems into question. This chapter reviews the highly contingent circumstances surrounding the ALP’s leadership race and reflects upon potential (general) problems that arise when digital democracy tools, such e-voting, are integrated with broad-based policies, such as “registered supporter” systems, with the explicit aim of increasing voter participation. Using a combination of interview and document data
(significant portions of which stem from the archives and detailed minutes I kept as co-chairperson for the ALP leadership race throughout the summer of 2011), this chapter also analyzes Canadian cultural voting expectations with regards to the one-person-one-vote principle, the equality of voters in decentralized voting conditions, and the integrity of the voting process itself, as these variables were shaped by the combined “registered supporter” and e-voting mechanisms manifest in the ALP case study.

WINDS OF CHANGE IN ALBERTA POLITICS

On Tuesday, 1 February 2011, the leader of the Alberta Liberal Party (ALP), David Swann, met with his Liberal caucus to discuss the party’s future. The meeting came after Global News Calgary had reported Swann was thinking about resigning. Having served one and a half terms as Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the constituency of Calgary-Mountain View, Swann observed the Liberal party shrink from nine elected MLAs to eight (in a legislature with eighty-three MLAs) following the departure of Dave Taylor, who moved to the nascent Alberta Party after publicly criticising Swann’s leadership style. Swann also presided over the divisive quasi-campaigns of two other MLAs, Darshan Kang (Calgary-McCall) and Kent Hehr (Calgary-Buffalo), who had publicly declared their interest in making a similar move (Wingrove, 2011). Global News had reported popular support for the ALP had dipped under the Liberals’ colloquial benchmark of 25 to 30 percent support across the province—a benchmark the party had reached throughout the 1990s and 2000s. An hour and a half after consulting his legislative team, Swann appeared at a news conference announcing his plans to resign as party leader. In his resignation speech, Swann stated: “It is the right time for a new leader and a new generation of Albertans to take our party into the future. . . . My decision to step down represents an opportunity to renew our party” (Kleiss, 2011b).

Swann had taken over leadership of the ALP in 2008 after defeating contenders Dave Taylor and Mo Elsalhy in a mail-in leadership vote in which members were issued paper ballots via Canada Post and asked to mail in their marked ballots for vote counting. While innovative in having offered access to decentralized voting to fee-paying party members, the 2008 ALP leadership race had not sought to expand the party base in any radical way; it had not sought to introduce digital media technologies or social media campaigns to ALP members; it had not aimed to revivify the party’s base by appealing to a youthful generation of potential new voters.
By contrast, a few days after Swann’s resignation, newly elected Alberta Liberal Party President Erick Ambtman claimed, “It’s the right time for a new leader and a new generation of Albertans to take our party into the future” (Wingrove, 2011). Ambtman noted his own appointment as a thirty-two-year-old party president, along with the appointment of then twenty-nine-year-old executive director, Corey Hogan, “shows a lot of fearlessness on the part of our party, a willingness to take some risks, to put out people and ideas that challenge the status quo” (Wingrove, 2011). Ambtman’s statements emerged within a sociological context in which Calgarian voters had recently opted for an energetic underdog candidate, thirty-eight-year-old Naheed Nenshi, to serve as their mayor in the city’s October 2010 municipal election.

The Nenshi campaign had left its indelible mark on partisan staffers and journalists alike. On 2 February 2011, the day following Swann’s resignation, Edmonton Journal reporter Karen Kleiss quoted Mount Royal University political scientist David Taras saying Alberta’s “Nenshi moment” would extend to the provincial election (Kleiss, 2011b). “After 40 years, there is this sense that there needs to be change,” Taras stated, adding: “There is a new generation, it’s a different Alberta, it’s younger, more cosmopolitan, more multicultural. . . . There is this new climate of change, and the parties have to reform in the face of this new Alberta. . . . We are going to go through these convulsions. . . . I think it is healthy” (Kleiss, 2011b). Less sanguinely, Taras also warned that a youth-led political revolution was not going to be easy: “This isn’t going to happen overnight. . . . We may have a stalemate in Alberta politics for quite some time. [The provincial election] could be a coalition. All bets are off.” But in the same news article, University of Lethbridge political scientist Peter McCormick was quoted as stating, “Once every generation, the Alberta political system resets itself in a very dramatic way, and this could be it.” McCormick linked his proto-prophesy to the futures of both Conservative and Liberal parties in the province: “We hear talk about apathy among the younger generation, about lack of voter turnout. Well, you don’t play the same song louder for them, you’ve got to change the tune. . . . It’s a whole style of politics and a whole set of assumptions about how to do things. . . . I predict this is going to be the youth movement for both the Conservatives and the Liberals” (Kleiss, 2011b)

McCormick’s speculation about a fundamental shift in Alberta politics led by a cohort of “youth” who would “change the tune” of provincial politics by changing its “style” and its assumptions about “how to do things” was echoed in the editorial pages of local and national newspapers. By the start of the
federal Canadian general election on 28 March 2011 (barely two months after Swann’s resignation), Calgary Herald reporter Richard Cuthbertson claimed: “As Calgarians prepare to vote for the ninth time in just seven years—including federal, provincial and municipal elections—politicians and their parties are looking for new ways to combat voter apathy. Many are casting their eyes to last fall’s municipal campaign in Calgary, a watermark for local public interest that saw the strongest vote turnout in at least 40 years” (Cuthbertson 2011). Despite Nenshi’s own warnings that political culture in Alberta had not changed fundamentally—a view he defended based on his campaign’s difficulties in attempting to overcome “bitter partisanship and ridiculous caricature” (Cuthbertson 2011)—reporters continued to focus attention on the possibility of a provincial political transformation at the hands of revitalized youth voters by drawing analogies to the Nenshi case study.

In the first week of the federal general election of 2011, reporter Laura Stone produced an account of Nenshi’s youth factor in a story first published via the Postmedia newswire in the Calgary Herald on 3 April 2011. She wrote: “Engaged young voters can energize a campaign and help lift a candidate to victory, if effectively harnessed through measures such as social media. If successful, as seen in Calgary’s trail-blazing mayoral race . . . which elected 39-year-old Naheed Nenshi, it could reshape the political landscape in Canada” (Stone, 2011d). Slightly revised versions of the same story and the same quotation appeared on 4 April 2011 in Postmedia syndicated newspapers across the country, including the Vancouver Sun, the Ottawa Citizen, and the Regina Leader Post (Stone, 2011b, a, c).1

The ensuing and disastrous electoral results for the federal Liberal Party on 2 May 2011, which witnessed the denigration of Liberals to non-Opposition status in the House of Commons as a distant third party, further spurred provincial Alberta Liberals to revive motifs of “youth” and “renewal” with fervent gusto. In the weeks prior to the ALP Special General Meeting in Calgary, where new rules for the party’s looming leadership race were to be finalized, a small cohort of ALP staffers and volunteers began to sow the seeds of “renewal” discourse, fertilizing the political landscape with promises of a democratic panacea for the Liberal brand in a province that hadn’t been a Liberal stronghold for nearly a century. The combination of a broad-based “registered supporter” outreach system and ease-of-access digital voting mechanisms, it was argued, would ensure a Nenshi-styled surge of support across the province.

The working assumption among this emerging cohort of renewal actors within the ALP was that digital technologies could bring in new supporters (and
ultimately voters) by virtue of its simple decentralized nature. A “new generation” of Liberals, it was believed, would turn out to vote in the 2012 provincial election, bringing energy and electoral success to the struggling provincial party. These assumptions glossed over numerous nuances associated with Nenshi’s interactive Web 2.0–styled campaign (discussed below), and ignored significant obstacles shaping voter engagement via digital voting systems.

It was also within this this context that Michael Cormican, a former federal Liberal candidate in Lethbridge, and I, a former federal Liberal candidate in Calgary East, were recruited by Ambtman to serve as co-chairs for the ALP leadership race in 2011. Both Cormican and I agreed to serve as official chairs for the leadership race at the Special General Meeting. Our joint appointment was supported by the two sitting Liberal MLAs seeking leadership at the time—namely, Laurie Blakeman (Edmonton Centre) and Hugh MacDonald (Edmonton-Gold Bar).²

THE SHIFT TO DIGITAL MECHANISMS FOR PARTISAN ENGAGEMENT

In the opinion of Calgary Herald columnist Don Braid, Nenshi’s nimble use of cheap, youth-driven social media had propelled his campaign ahead of better-established competitors, including the well-known local journalist Barb Higgins and the established city councilor associated with the provincial Conservative Party, Ric McIver.¹ Braid wrote:

Whatever happens Oct. 18, Nenshi’s campaign is already becoming a model of how to launch political popularity using Facebook, Twitter, Podcasts, You-Tube, blogs and even the iPhone. Other candidates are on the Internet, too, of course. McIver and Higgins both have effective websites. They all use Twitter and Facebook (or somebody does it for them.) Yet Nenshi clearly generates far more online interest and enthusiasm than any other candidate. Late last week, he had 3,440 Facebook friends, compared to 942 for Higgins and 2,105 for McIver. Nearly 2,000 people follow him on Twitter, while McIver and Higgins are both in the 1,100 range. His video is ahead by about 4,000 views on YouTube. (Braid, 2010)

While Braid believed Nenshi’s early online popularity did not guarantee an electoral win (Braid cited an estimate that held only 10,000 Calgarians at the time used Twitter at all), the reporter also believed Nenshi could win if the third-ranking
candidate could convert his start-up online campaign into a full-blown traditional ground campaign built upon policy documents, phone calls, door knocking, lawn signs, public forums, and leaflet drops—a set of tasks it appears Nenshi’s campaign team had already started to perform. As Braid concluded:

Nenshi offered seven of his “better ideas” long before the official campaign even began. Many of his policies are accompanied by detailed background papers. The result, to judge by reams of online comment, is that people pulled in by social media saw a real campaign behind the virtual one. The online buzz then drew in more people to look. Now that the official campaign has started, Nenshi has jumped into more traditional politicking, attending as many debates and public events as he can. (Braid, 2010)

Braid’s speculations about the need for a traditional campaign behind the virtual and digital aesthetics of Nenshi’s early strategies were explored further in subsequent journalistic analyses following the end of the electoral period in October 2011. In her review of Nenshi’s campaign tactics, journalist Kelly Cryderman traced the mechanisms by which cheap social media outlets, which served as the original foundation for the Nenshi campaign, were steadily integrated into an effective and more traditional campaign strategy by September 2010, thereby solidifying the candidate’s growing appeal and ultimate win (Cryderman, 2010). The campaign had effectively integrated policy experts and volunteers early on in an effort to design ideas that would appeal to a broad base of potential municipal voters; the campaign then used social media in an interactive Web 2.0 fashion to disseminate those ideas and also to collect critical and positive responses from community members and potential voters. The campaign then integrated those ideas into its statements, policy utterances, and marketing material.

In using social media as an integrative channel for commentary, feedback, and policy development, and by recruiting community members on the other end of the digital interface to join the campaign in person, Nenshi’s strategy created a sense of ownership among the online participants active in the campaign’s digital discourse. These “hyper-engaged” volunteers soon constituted the core of what came to be Nenshi’s growing network of campaign outreach agents. They proselytized Nenshi’s message online and in person, serving as human brand carriers who travelled seamlessly between digital discussion rooms to coffee meet-and-greets back to Facebook forums.
In sum, the Nenshi campaign strategy relied on social media as a conduit for interactively sharing and refining the candidate's policies, thereby creating a sense of ownership over the campaign itself and motivating a constant transference of personnel from what might have been a temporally connected digital community to dedicated in-person volunteers, networkers, and voters. This strategic campaign approach mimicked the decentralized campaign structure first developed by Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008, which gave birth to the notion of recruiting online voters via a seamless web of online and in-person interaction and co-commitment. It was important that this networked strategy also unfolded at a time when Nenshi’s opponents failed to grow their own bases of support, or even to view Nenshi as a growing threat and thus a worthy target for attack or counter-campaigning (Cryderman 2010).

In the offices of the Alberta Liberal Party, Nenshi’s electoral success spurred staffers to focus on the youth aspect of new campaign strategies, leading to the development of the party’s first-ever Twitter feed. In October 2010, the ALP announced www.twitter.com/albertaliberals—a harbinger, the party said, of its digitally facilitated “renewal.” Communications staffer Jody MacPherson declared:

> With the growing influence of social media as a tool to galvanize supporters, it’s time for Alberta Liberals to join the conversation. During the recent municipal election, there were weekly reports with updates on each of the Calgary mayoralty candidates’ successes on Twitter, Facebook and other social media sites. Those weekly stats showed Naheed Nenshi’s growing support, but many discounted social media saying that the people on Twitter and Facebook would not get out and vote. This theory is now under question with Mayor Nenshi’s victory on October 18. (MacPherson 2010)

Within weeks, a handful of ALP youth (mostly under the age of thirty) created a stream of Alberta Liberal Party blogs and online commentary postings; they filled Facebook and Twitter pages with political hashtags meant to advertise the party’s coming of age in the digital era.

Yet the cultural transformation MacPherson alluded to did not arise within the ALP over the course of the following nine months, that is, in the lead up to the party’s leadership race, nor did it arise over the course of the following year and a half in the lead up to the province’s general election. In part, this is because no thoroughgoing communications or digital infrastructure strategy was created to innovate policy-making by introducing interactive engagement with
community members or individual Albertans on pressing matters of social, economic, or political importance. Neither at the party level nor at the constituency association level did the ALP launch any kind of coordinated communications strategy aimed at integrating the views of Albertans into the party’s ongoing affairs. Thus, apart from introducing a Twitter feed, which remained mostly a one-way stream of communication from ALP staffers and caucus members to digital listeners tuned into the party’s hashtags, the ALP ignored and failed to incorporate the most galvanizing aspects of Nenshi’s Web 2.0–inspired campaign tactics—including, especially, the recruitment of interactive online actors as in-person volunteers, donors, and voters.

Thus, by the formal start date of the ALP leadership race six months later, the nuances of the Nenshi campaign—the combination of interactive online channels, the incorporation of policy views emanating from outside the party into internal platform concepts, and the translation of temporal digital engagement into material in-person participation—remained elusive. By contrast, the ALP “renewal” strategies, as presented at the party’s May 2011 Special General Meeting in Calgary, focused primarily on ease of access to voting (interpreted as a no-fee structure for party “membership” or “supporter” status), and decentralized voting mechanisms (interpreted as digital and telephonic voting mechanisms). While innovative, these “renewal” mechanisms did not engender networked growth strategies for the ALP; they did, however, come packed with ambiguities and operational hiccups that led to significant growth difficulties for a small opposition party already struggling to finance itself in a provincial political landscape dominated by a well-funded and organizationally powerful provincial Conservative Party.

At the Special General Meeting in Calgary, ALP staffers did offer party members one bylaw amendment to the constitution that attempted to incorporate a policy feedback mechanism to encourage more grassroots engagement. Known as Resolution B, the proposed amendment included a series of steps by which party members could develop and put forward new policy ideas (addressing any topic in economics, health, education, environment) for consideration and approval via a membership vote at annual general meetings of the ALP. At the Special General Meeting, ALP members voted in favour of Resolution B, which thereafter stipulated (as a bylaw) that the results of votes on policy matters at ALP annual or general meetings would be used to “prioritize the Policy” of the ALP, such that those policies receiving most votes among the membership would
be ranked higher and therefore most likely to be incorporated into campaign/electoral platforms in the future (ALP, 2011: Section 27). The bylaw also noted policies obtaining the three highest scores among voters would be considered “Priority Resolutions” for the ALP and party elite would be obligated in the future to “include in its Election Platform a minimum of two out of the three Priority Resolutions from the most recent General Meeting” (ALP, 2011: Section 28). In sum, the bylaws embodied in Resolution B ensured member-produced policy passed by agreement at annual party conventions could, in principle, find its way into the party’s electoral platform.

However, Resolution B entrenched only a once-a-year feedback mechanism by which members and party participants could voice policy ideas with the hope of obtaining enough votes to become a “top priority.” The resolution did not inject a dynamic, interactive feedback mechanism by which ALP participants could frequently engage, reassess, reform, or alter core party policies through regularized interaction with party elites. In addition, while the bylaw existed on paper following the May Special General Meeting, its practical effect was not felt among party rank and file at any point in the lead up to the 2012 provincial election. At the 2011 Annual Convention held in Red Deer following the end of the leadership race (but before the general election), ALP staff and caucus did not seek policy proposals from the floor and no new policy proposals were put forward from by members of the party. Meanwhile, the “new” communications tools embodied in the party’s Twitter and Facebook postings remained limited to a narrow core of participant actors composed primarily of ALP legislative staffers, ALP party office staffers, and ALP (leadership) campaign volunteers.

ATTRACTING AND INTEGRATING NEW POLITICAL ACTORS

The lack of an interactive Web 2.0 communications and volunteer recruitment strategy did not necessarily mean, however, that Liberal elites were not trying to alter the party’s structure. Following Swann’s resignation in February 2011, a cluster of executives and staffers in the party formed a tightly knit group that spearheaded efforts to redefine the 2011 leadership “rules” to ensure greater interactivity with Albertans and to initiate a “renewal” agenda. The party’s new executive director, Corey Hogan, its operations officer, Corina Ganton, its president, Erick Ambtman, and its vice-president of communications, Matt Grant, led the group. Those four, all aged between twenty-five and thirty-three years old, constituted a core organizational unit of elite partisans (they were either on
the ALP payroll or occupied executive party positions) dedicated to altering the structure of the ALP to attract more voters, more donors, and ultimately greater electoral success for Liberals in Alberta.

The cultural production of a new engagement equation—one that equated digital systems, social media, and youth voters to party renewal—emerged prominently in the lead up to the Special General Meeting in May 2011. Here I quote a small selection of postings made at the time by Ganton, whose enthusiasm demonstrates a seemingly unquestioned belief in the renewal virtues of youth, social media, and digital technologies. On 7 May 2011, Ganton posted on YouTube a link to a three-minute video, entitled the “Gen Why Media Project,” discussing issues that might motivate young people to get involved in politics (Ganton, 2011c). Ganton followed the same day with a tweet about being a “youth” at an ALP Board of Directors meeting where leadership rules—including entry fees for candidates and vote dates—were being preliminarily discussed: “At the #ALP board meeting. Love t/ debates. It’s so great to be able to be a young person around this table. Many younger faces here” (2011b). A message the same day indicated the council had agreed to baseline rules for the leadership convention. Enthusiastically, Ganton tweeted: “The latest @albertaliberals news . . . #ablib #ableg LEADERSHIP RULES SET! WERE OFF TO THE RACES!” (2011d). A day later, Ganton retweeted a message by another Twitter user stating: “C’m on young Liberals - lets redefine, revamp and reenergize our federal party. Now is the time and it’s up to us. #lpc #oyl #ovyl #uoyl #ylc.” On 10 May, Ganton tweeted (presumably as an analogy to the provincial case study), “The next generation is the Liberals’ salvation,” citing a Globe and Mail column by Lawrence Martin, who argued politics in Canada is a “one man” show and the federal Liberal’s “salvation” would come in finally choosing a “young” person (2011e).

Ganton was not alone in constructing a culture within the ALP that was meant to inspire youth-oriented political engagement via social media and digital portals. In the days preceding the ALP’s Special General Meeting, Ganton tweeted: “New Liberal Post of the Day: Kick starting Renewal.” The tweet linked to an online blog posting by ALP executive director, Corey Hogan, as posted on Hogan’s lobby website, New Liberal Initiative—a site promoting the establishment of an independent organization intended to engage young voters to serve as the ALP’s next generation of policy decision-makers. The New Liberal Initiative posted blogs supporting the incorporation of a “registered supporter” system and new e-voting mechanisms into the ALP’s constitutional and operational structure.

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Despite serving as the ALP’s presumably neutral executive director, Hogan used his online blog to argue in favour of allowing a “registered supporter” system in which all resident Albertans could vote in both constituency nomination races and party leadership races. Rather than restricting the party to its previous practice of allowing votes by only card-carrying, fee-paying members, Hogan prophesied the “registered supporter” system would achieve significant renewal goals by virtue of being able to

- draw in new supporters who would not be willing to join the Party.
- Create larger lists of people to solicit donations, signs, and volunteer hours from. Choose standard bearers who are best able to connect with the voters who will be making the ultimate decision. Send a powerful signal that we are an open Party. (Hogan, 2011a)

At the time, Hogan had already authored various proposed constitutional amendments which, he predicted, would reshape the ALP’s governing constitution in favour of attracting new, hitherto nonvoting Albertans into the party’s fold.

Hogan’s explicit inspiration for doing so came from the concept of an “open primary” system, as used in presidential nominations in select American states. An open primary system exists in those American states that allow any eligible voter within the state’s jurisdiction to vote in the selection of presidential candidates for either Republican or Democratic parties. This contrasts with the “closed primary” system operating in other American states in which citizens must be card-carrying members of the given party to vote in that party’s respective presidential nomination race. It also contrasts with the typically closed nomination and closed voting systems at play in Canadian political parties, where only card-carrying (and usually fee-paying) members vote for the next leader of a given party in an internal race.

To advance the adoption of an “open primary” styled leadership race, Hogan issued a document entitled A New Liberal’s Guide to Change. The document declared the need to move ahead with major changes to the party’s internal structure at breakneck speed, explicitly rejecting the need to consider unintended consequences (Ganton, 2011a; Hogan, 2011b). Hogan wrote:

There’s a school of thought in liberal circles right now about the need to think long and hard about what kind of movement liberalism is going to be before we rush forward with any dramatic overhaul of our Party. But
Complementarily, Ambtman announced the party would be using new digital mechanisms—that is, telephone and Internet voting—in the upcoming leadership race. His announcement was made three weeks prior to the Special General Meeting where members gathered to discuss and vote on significant alterations to the party’s operational and constitutional structure. Ambtman declared, “[Digital voting] will allow a lot more people to have access to the contest,” adding that the rules governing the leadership race (and its voting mechanisms) had already been unanimously approved by the ALP Board of Directors (Massinon, 2011).

Ambtman was referring here to a meeting of the Board of Directors held that month which included, in theory, the party president, vice presidents, regional chairs, constituency association presidents, and the past party president. At the meeting, board members apparently agreed to the use of digital voting mechanisms. In interviews conducted with ALP constituency executives and MLAs a year later, however (for the purposes of the current study), interview participants indicated a number of key positions on the board of directors were either vacant or held in duplicate at the time of that board meeting. In other words, there was unlikely to have been quorum at the meeting, since posts were vacant or one person held more than one post, thereby decreasing the overall number of votes required to pass a directive among ALP executives. No minutes exist of the board meeting in question, but interview data suggests both the “registered supporter” and “digital voting” systems were proposed only as preliminarily ideas and not formally approved by board members before being publicly announced by Ambtman.

In addition, because the new e-voting mechanisms “agreed upon” changed the rules governing nearly all components of the ALP’s internal voting processes, including who could vote, when they could vote, how they would be registered to vote, and by what mechanism they could vote, Ambtman’s declaration ignored the fact e-voting affected the party’s codified commitments to its membership, and thus required membership support in the form of a majority vote at a party convention to instantiate. Instead, the proposed e-voting mechanisms were introduced by the ALP’s executive and staff as though they were neutral administrative tools that would not affect the fundamental principles of fairness, transparency, or other constitutional obligations the party had to
its fee-paying membership base. Unabashedly and unreservedly, the close-knit renewal team of Hogan, Ganton, Ambtman, and Grant promoted the theme of “Politics Re-Imagined” at the Special General Meeting held in Calgary between 28 and 29 May 2011, where digital voting was presumed unproblematic, outside the scope of constitutional consideration, and not subjected to a membership-based vote.

RENEWAL IN AN AGE OF DIGITAL DEMOCRATIC OUTREACH

On 28 May 2011, the day preceding the Special General Meeting, approximately 100 Liberal members (of more than 2,200 party members across the province at the time) arrived to a Calgary hotel conference room, where they were faced with the odd predicament that their executive director, Corey Hogan, whose role it was to facilitate the meeting neutrally, was handing out lobbyist booklets published by his and party president Erick Ambtman’s New Liberal Initiative. The booklets aimed to convince members at the meeting to vote in favour of the “registered supporter” system. Entitled YES!, the document argued that proposed constitutional amendments would create a new category of casual party affiliate—the “Registered Supporter”—who could register support without being bogged down by long-term party identity or membership fees. Hogan’s document stated the party would collect the personal details of these new supporters to allow for future communication. The lack of a membership fee would enable thousands of Albertans who would not have otherwise joined the party, due to the burden of a $5.00 annual membership fee, to do so.

The YES! document also stated that registered supporters would eventually encourage two-way community interaction on policy issues, because the new category of affiliate would encourage party members to “build networks in the community” and “encourage community outreach” to obtain more names and contact details in ways members had never done before:

The nature of politics in Canada is changing. We can deny this, we can fight against it, or we can be the first Party [sic] in Canada to accept that people look at political involvement differently today. In the process we will be positioning our Party as the most inclusive, grassroots political organization in Canada. Doing so will bring in a new generation and create a base for this Party for years to come. Say Yes to Change. Vote Yes on Resolutions C, D, E [emphases Hogan’s]. (Hogan, 2011c: 11)
With Hogan’s strongly affirmative lobbying document in hand, and no anti-resolution document circulating, ALP members in the room the following day proceeded to vote in favour of a series of constitutional bylaws that institutionalized the “registered supporter” concept, although the mechanism by which supporters would be registered—whether by paper signature (where a person would manually complete a registration form and have her or his data uploaded to a general database by an individual campaigner or ALP office staffer), by online registration (where a person would enter personal contact details online and tick a box declaring adherence to the party’s principles, or otherwise provide a digital signature to link the registration to their personhood), or by mere recommendation or inclusion arbitrarily (where campaign teams could submit names and addresses for registration based on people’s names and addresses as listed in a phone book or on the province’s elector’s list, whom the campaign believed would support a given candidate despite having made no personal or online contact with the campaign team)—was left an open question. What was assumed, however, was that these mechanisms—however they unfolded in the months ahead—would necessarily support the party’s growth and its two-way communication with communities and voters across Alberta.

On 1 June 2011, therefore, the ALP became the first political entity in Canada defined by adherence to a “registered supporter” system: a casual party affiliation not dependent upon membership fees and tied to no set of rules determining how supporters could actually be registered. With positive media coverage and internal euphoria among the vanguard group of “renewal” agents over the success of amendments enshrining the “registered supporter” system, however, few questions were raised on these points.

OPERATIONAL OBSTACLES IN NEW SUPPORTER REGISTRATION AND E-VOTING MANAGEMENT

At the operational level, the party’s three-person staff (including Hogan, Ganton, and a part-time university intern) took on the task of managing, directing, and institutionalizing all aspects of the new registered supporter and digitized voting systems. By mid-August, that system had come to include nearly 20,000 names, addresses, and phone numbers. Almost by necessity (because of the small staff and many tasks the ballooning registered supporter list required), ALP voter “policies” as they related to the voter privacy and vote integrity (including the issuance of double PINs to persons with name variations, and the issuance of
PINs to the homes of people who had passed away, or who had been mistakenly or unwantedly added to the ALP “supporter” list, including pets and prank names), as well as cyber-security concerns over data ownership, data security, data theft, and the possibility of data manipulation, were developed ad hoc starting immediately after the 29 May Special General Meeting. A post-mortem analysis of internal party documents (including emails, all-candidates meeting minutes, and decision letters issued by Cormican and myself between May and September 2011) demonstrates that under-staffing and complex system concerns related to “registered” voters and digital voting mechanisms manifested themselves in a series of significant operational, technical, and philosophical problems for the ALP.

Formal complaints submitted to Cormican and myself, as chairpersons for the race, included Hugh MacDonald’s concern that non-Albertans, dead people, and cats were appearing on the list of “registered supporters,” and that there were no transparent means of stopping the issuance of PINs to those people or entities. The MacDonald campaign also complained that fee-paying members who had signed up to support his campaign were not appearing on the digitized voting list issued to all campaign teams. Raj Sherman’s campaign formally complained about the publication of “registered supporter” names ahead of schedule, and the requirements for a paper trail or material signature trail to link supporter names to existent individuals, which the team felt was an unnecessary requirement. The Bill Harvey campaign formally complained there was no vetting process in place to ensure “registered supporters”—who were supposed to be at least eighteen years old, with names appearing on Alberta’s voter list or as residents of Alberta, and whose intention was to vote in the Liberal race—met any or all of those requirements. The Laurie Blakeman campaign complained there had been an agreed-upon convention to use a paper-based system to sign up new “registered supporters” at the outset of the race, but that the paper-based system had been abandoned ad hoc and without justification, to the detriment of those teams that had spent time and money collecting paper signatures to demonstrate a paper trail to voters. Finally, as the leadership race neared its end in September 2011, the MacDonald campaign complained that returned-to-sender PINs, which were returned to the ALP office in the last few weeks of the campaign, were not properly disposed of—or that there was no known protocol for the secure disposal of those PINs, which could be misused for double or triple voters if released to pernicious actors. Indeed, minutes of the weekly all-candidates meetings held by telephone throughout the summer of 2011 (which
Cormican and I moderated in conjunction or solo) demonstrate that all five campaign teams complained at some point about one or more issues related to the lack of material (versus digital) traceability to “registered supporters” and the problem of cyber-security with relation to online registrations, online PIN usage, and online vote tabulation and auditing.

As executive director and thus *de facto* manager of the “registered supporter” and e-voting systems, Hogan’s response to these concerns included the following: with regard to misuse of PINs, Hogan contended it is illegal to open someone else’s mail, so household members would refrain from opening or using a child’s, senior’s, or partner’s PIN to vote twice (or thrice) on this legal basis; that while a paper trail leading to the existent digital voter is ideal in ideal circumstances, the ALP could not guarantee such a paper trail nor would it enforce the requirement to have a material paper trail to digital voters, as it did not have the resources to do so; that returned-to-sender PINs would be disposed of by office staff (Hogan, Ganton, and the university intern, though Hogan did not explain how disposal would occur); and that the third-party provider could be trusted to save and store digital votes securely (though repeated requests for details of the ALP’s contract with the third-party provider went unanswered by Hogan).

In the fortnight preceding the final leadership vote date (8 September), Cormican and I requested a formal statistical audit of “registered supporters” to ensure that a significant percentage of the names appearing on the (by then) 25,000-plus names and addresses did, in fact, belong to residents of Alberta who were eighteen years or older (or fee-paying ALP members, who could be as young as fourteen) and that each such resident had been issued with one PIN, and one PIN only (with any additional PINs issued due to name variations being deactivated in advance). Hogan responded to indicate the ALP did not have the budget (and had not budgeted for) any form of statistical review or external auditing of the registered supporter list of potential voters prior to the vote, and that the party was relying primarily on a the “honour system” among Albertans, expecting them not to misuse PINs by double or triple voting.

**PHILOSOPHICAL LIMITATIONS TO DIGITAL OUTREACH AND VOTER ENGAGEMENT**

Given these circumstances, the remainder of this chapter analyzes the voting principles that emerge as sites of contention and contestation within the ALP experiment. Within this discussion, two Canadian voting principles arise as
worthy of detailed consideration: Integrity of the one-person-one-vote principle and the equality of voters; and integrity (and anonymity) of the voting process.

**Integrity of the One-Person-One-Vote Principle and the Equality of Voters**

Between 6 September and 10 September, more than 8,000 personal identification numbers (PINs) were used to log into the ALP’s voting system by telephone or online, using a specially dedicated website. The vote tabulations and preferences of those voters (including their preferential listing of candidates by telephone key pad entry or online numbered selections in order of preference) were collected, stored, and hosted by the third-party private provider. In theory, each PIN issued was associated with one individual person, thereby assuring the protection of the ALP’s one-person-one-vote policy.

Telephone and online voting mechanisms were meant to facilitate voting among members and supporters who were not able or who did not want to travel to physical polling stations, where they would have been issued a pencil and paper ballot to vote behind a private screen. A key assumption underpinning the ALP’s e-voting mechanisms was that users of these digital technologies would not experience any significant differences in the voting experience or practice of ballot casting when compared to material, in-person voting by paper ballot. This assumption ought to be opened to critical inquiry, however, because digital voting brings with it a different space, a different set of relationships within that space, different power dynamics, and differing outcomes based on the context within which it occurs, as compared to paper-ballot voting behind a private screen monitored by neutral voting clerks.

First, let us consider the domestic space of digital voting. Online and telephone voting takes place within a context defined by particular parameters. In an egalitarian household, where each member of the household is assumed to hold his or her own political opinion and each member of the household (where the telephone or Internet connection is housed) is allowed to cast his or her own vote, such an assumption may be manifest in reality. But many households in Alberta cannot be described as egalitarian. The assumption that all Albertan households, or at least all the households participating in the ALP vote, demonstrate an equality among potential voters in political opinion and personal rights to vote unimpeded is an indefensible one. Access to the Internet or telephone, or personal privacy when using those services, might not be guaranteed. The ability to use one’s own PIN may not be guaranteed. The ability to make up one’s own mind when at the point of keying in a voting preference might not be guaranteed.
In sum, the belief that digital voting by telephone or Internet is the virtual equivalent of private voting booths and paper ballots breaks down quickly when the power dynamics within private households are analyzed. Domestic power dynamics determine and shape decentralized e-voting processes. When they are taken into account, electronic voting leaves much to be desired from the perspective of the one-person-one-vote principle and the presumption of a fundamental equality between voters, where no one vote gets more of a say, a louder “voice,” or more ballots than any other voter.

Given the unbalanced and often unequal nature of household power dynamics (between spouses, between parents and youths, and between adults and their seniors, between able-bodied and disabled persons, or between the cognitively capable and the cognitively disabled, and so on), we must ask whether the one-person-one-vote principle in domestic digital voting scenarios can be guaranteed—is it equal in this respect to private voting booths? The question here is primarily one of power—within households, within workplaces, between people in domestic environments, and between actors (that is, voters) in any decentralized location where private, unimpeded Internet or telephone access to the voting process is a prerequisite.

Second, let us consider the psychological aspect of voting in equal or unequal circumstances. Let us assume that each person in a given household receives a PIN, which they can use to log in to an online ballot or to call in to a telephone ballot. The access to digital ballots in situ (in a person’s home, where the PIN arrives by post) presupposes that all individuals in the household are respected, enjoy individual liberty and the freedom of thought, and the equal ability to practice their voting rights. The overarching assumption at play is that members of a household, regardless of sex, gender, economic status, physical status, cognitive status, or other forms of status, are equally unhindered in their voting actions by other voters or nonvoters in the household (or decentralized place of voting). A basic feminist analysis raises warning flags around these assumptions. The integrity of a one-person-one-vote principle is entirely undone in a patriarchal or matriarchal household—a household containing domineering or oppressive relations between its members, in which the recipient of a PIN does not have the necessary psychological or physical ability to vote when obligated to do so with no protective screen in place.

Not only might the PIN be expropriated and used by another recipient who has already voted, or who is not eligible to vote, or who does not want the dominated person to vote at all, but the psychological domination of some members
of a household over others (including in cases of mental illness, senility, cognitive impairment, or youth naiveté) allows powerful authorities in households to control voting outcomes. When placed within the context of domestic environments, e-voting may provide no protective measures against the possibility of psychological domination and vote control.

It might be argued that voters are never fully equal in any case (domineering people might not allow subjugated members of a household to visit a voting site in person), but on-site voting does avoid the problems of domestically decentralized e-voting systems in which domineering authority figures can control the final act of voting. Those voters living in subjugated relationships who do manage to get to a voting site in person ultimately benefit from the last resort of a voting screen behind which they can mark a ballot in privacy without the immediate influence of the domineering agent.

In sum, power dynamics within households and other decentralized voting locations (such as the workplace) shape voting outcomes. Insofar as digital voting removes the private screen behind which a woman, a man, a disabled person, an elderly person, or a youth can express their personal political views, it fails to ensure “one-person, one-vote,” potentially exacerbating inequality between voters. E-voting displaces the act of voting from a monitored site where paper, pencil, and individuated screen ensure egalitarian protections, to an unregulated, unmonitored, and potentially unbalanced site vulnerable to manipulation and domineering power dynamics.

**Integrity and Anonymity of the Voting Process**

Picture digital voting as it would have taken place in the case of the 2011 ALP leadership race. A person (let us say an ALP member, or a newly “registered supporter”) would have received a PIN in the post with an envelope addressed to her- or himself. Inside the envelope there would have been a letter from the ALP, stating the person could use the randomly assigned PIN to log into an online ballot or telephone system to cast their preferential vote.

In the case of online voting, the person would have typed the URL for the online voting website into a web browser’s address bar. She would have logged into the ballot using her PIN. She would have seen a ballot appear on the screen in which the names of the five leadership candidates appeared in randomized order from top to bottom (with each voter receiving what was claimed to be a randomly allocated lineup of candidate names, so that no one candidate’s name consistently appeared at the top of the list). The voter would then have used
her mouse to scroll over the names of the candidates and preferentially rate the candidates from one to five (or any number between one and five, as voters were not required to use all five preferential votes). A similar audio procedure would have occurred via telephone, but rather than using a mouse to scroll over names and type in numbers from 1 to 5, the voter would have used her keypad to select 1 to 5 for particular candidates as they were listed. The member would have then confirmed her selection, and her ballot would have been registered as cast.

But what happened in the ALP case after the member clicked “Confirm” or pressed the star key to confirm a telephone selection? The member’s PIN would have been attached digitally to her voting preferences—her ranking of candidates from 1 to 5. That digital information would be entered automatically into a database that was also logging all other preferential votes submitted, each submission being attached to a particular PIN and possibly (or potentially) to a computer IP address. Telephone data would have been recorded in a digital database similarly linked to the member’s PIN and (potentially) telephone number.

A number of questions emerge here. Since—in theory—PINs can be linked to names as well as IP addresses or telephone numbers, the member’s name could be linked, indirectly, to her voting preference. To give credit to third-party service providers of e-voting systems, modern voting mechanisms and anonymity tools do allow for the disassociation in practice between PINs and voter identities to ensure anonymity in the process. However, the anonymity of a digital vote (whether cast online or telephonically) is always dependent, in principle, on those tools of disassociation being provided as a service to the client, in this case the ALP. The philosophical assurance of voting anonymity is thus dependent upon the operational assurance that the vote collector, vote storage agent, and vote counter have disassociation (or scrambling) tools available, that these tools function effectively, that the contract between the service provider and the client (the ALP) includes the purchase of these services, and that the third-party provider offers provisions assuring the use of these disassociation tools in all instances with a transparent mechanism for auditing the procedure.

In the case of the ALP, these operational assurances were nowhere to be found. If they did exist in contractual or internal form, the Liberal caucus was unaware, its Executive Board was unaware, its constituency presidents were unaware, its leadership candidates (and their campaign teams) were unaware, and leadership co-chairs (such as Cormican and myself) were unaware. Indeed, requests to obtain copies of the service provision contract with the third-party provider came to nothing, as no contractual documents were ever shared with
anyone outside the ALP staff of Hogan, Ganton, and (potentially) the part-time intern. In addition, staffers hired after the 2012 general election to replace Hogan and Ganton, along with a newly elected party president, Todd van Vliet, were also unable to locate contractual documents upon request for this study. In sum, while third-party providers of e-voting systems may possess the aforementioned technical capacities, the ALP case study demonstrates no evidence of such technical capacity being agreed upon, paid for, or utilized in principle or in detail in this particular voting scenario, leading to questions as to whether assumptions of technical capacity always translate into practice.

A final issue in this respect relates to the ownership of the datasets produced by e-voting systems. Paper ballots can be stored in boxes for years, where their longevity is dependent upon their materiality. The disposal of material paper ballots effectively destroys the memory of votes cast. In digitized voting, by contrast, a table of votes cast (collected and tabulated) exists in digital form; the destruction of one copy of the database hardly implies the destruction of the data. Voting databases can be easily copied and shared—reproduced with relative ease. The philosophical assurance of the long-term anonymity of voters and their voting preferences is dependent upon the operational ownership of digital voting sets as well as the effective and operational destruction of all copies of voting datasets.

In the case of the ALP, lacking a transparent contract for services, it is impossible to know whether such assurances were in place. ALP staffers and executives who participated in this study between June 2012 and August 2013 report not being able to locate any information, contract, or paper trail detailing who (or what entity) ultimately owned the ALP leadership vote data, how it was managed, how it was shared, and how it was (if it was) destroyed. To this date, it is unknown whether the service provider contracted by the ALP created a database that recorded PINs, IP addresses, telephone numbers, and votes cast, or whether it scrambled and rendered anonymous data using accepted techniques for aggregating votes into indiscernible groups. It is also unknown whether the final tally and database of voting preferences was ever viewed by anyone outside of the third party provider (by any party executives or staffers). Last, it is unknown whether that database still exists or whether it has been destroyed. In the words of one long-time Liberal, “I assume someone out there knows how I voted, and that someone has a database that tells them how everyone voted.” Whether this is true simply cannot be determined in the current case study, but it certainly does raise questions as to the level of detail required for digitized
voting systems to ensure long-term and permanent anonymity of votes cast in such e-voting systems in the future.

In sum, the operational malfunctioning of the ALP leads to serious questions about the philosophical integrity of the e-voting process, and it highlights how serious provisions could be missed or overlooked by an entity overwhelmed by the financial and personnel resources required to ensure a free, fair, transparent, electronic voting process.

A COMPARISON BASED ON FEDERAL VOTING CULTURE

To highlight the philosophical effect of operational gaps evident in the ALP e-voting case study, it is useful to compare the example with some of the more prominent concerns set out by Elections Canada in its 1998 report, *Technology and the Voting Process*. That report explores digital voting processes and the realities manifest in potential e-voting structures at the turn of the century. In this section we review three of the most relevant standards of voting practice as described by Elections Canada with regard to formal federal voting procedures deemed “democratic” in the context of Canadian politics. The goal is to highlight key features of voting culture in Canada to understand what a typical Albertan voter would have been used to doing, and what a typical Albertan would have been justified in reasonably expecting, when casting a political vote (whether in a general or partisan election) as based on their voting experiences in Canadian (federal) elections.

According to Elections Canada, digital voting mechanisms are highly problematic; they are open to fraudulent manipulation due to a lack of cyber-security mechanisms that ensure votes cast in elections remain private, anonymous, and destroyable (Elections Canada, 1998). The Elections Canada review of digital voting highlights seven areas of concern: registration confirmation; the ballot; casting a decision; ballot verification and anonymity of the elector; submission of the ballot; vote tabulation; retention and storage. Below, we explore the ALP case study to analyze the specific principles of registration confirmation, the ballot, and casting a decision.

**Voter Registration Confirmation**

Elections Canada reports the “the issue of effectively identifying eligible voters (e.g., PIN numbers, fingerprints, voice prints, retina scans)” as a significant hurdle for e-voting technologies (Elections Canada, 1998).
In the ALP case study, the party relied upon two databases for voter identification: the ALP membership list and the 2008 Alberta Electors List. In the first instance, members of the Alberta Liberal Party included anyone aged fourteen and over who paid a $5 fee to be a member of the party. “Members” did not have to be Canadian citizens, but they did have to be residents of Alberta. “Supporters” included anyone who appeared as an eligible voter on the 2008 Alberta Electors List. This meant supporters had to be at least eighteen years old, of Canadian citizenship, and resident in Alberta. If a “supporter” claimed eligibility to vote but her or his name did not appear on the Electors List, the ALP’s vetting system was supposed to determine whether the person was a) a Canadian citizen b) lived in Alberta and c) over the age of eighteen. However, based on minutes of all-candidates meetings chaired by myself and Cormican, with ALP staff members and leadership team volunteers present, it is evident the ALP lacked sufficient personnel and financial resources to check individual names and qualifications manually. The party was unable to telephone the hundreds (and then thousands) of households appearing on the potential voters list which had been earmarked by leadership teams as potentially problematic.

By August 2011, as the list of “supporters” had grown to over 15,000 people, ALP staff members and leadership campaign teams further revealed the majority of those names had been added to the “registered supporters” list with no paper trail or individual digital trail; that is, supposed “supporters” had completed a “registered supporter” card neither manually nor digitally. The allowance of any kind of “registered supporter” became an ad hoc policy developed by ALP staff members as Hogan indicated a lack of institutional capacity to stop the phenomenon from happening or to check whether those individuals had expressed intentions to be listed on the ALP’s potential list of voters (and thus be mailed PINS for voting).

Given the lack of paper or individual digital trails linking “registered supporters” to actual people, Hogan informed Cormican and myself of the ALP’s developing protocol for voter identification: “registered supporters” who appeared on the list of voters (that is, those people whose names and addresses had been submitted to the party office as “registered supporters” by a given campaign team) were first cross-checked with Alberta’s 2008 Electors List. According to notes from a telephone conversation between Hogan and myself (subsequently reported to Cormican), the ALP’s proposed “cross-checking” and “scrubbing” processes involved use of at least two data points to verify a person’s name against the 2008 Electors List. Either a name and address or a name and a
telephone number or an address and a telephone number had to appear in combination on the “registered supporter” list to confirm the identity of the supporter. If the names, addresses and telephone numbers submitted by campaign teams passed this first check, the ALP automatically issued a PIN to the person’s name and address regardless of whether the 2008 list matched current addresses or resident locations.

Alternatively, if a person’s name did not appear on the 2008 Electors List, the name would be flagged but not removed from the ALP voters list unless an individual campaign team brought forward additional reasons for doing so. For example, names were sometimes flagged because of a spelling error in the name, an incorrect or incomplete address, or an incorrect or incomplete phone number. Problematically, the ALP did not have the financial or personnel resources to actually follow up on flagged cases. Instead, leadership teams were expected to investigate those flagged names (which numbered in the hundreds by the middle of August). Unless campaign teams brought forward evidence that the names or addresses did not correspond to real people, the ALP continued to issue PINs to the names and addresses it had received. Over 28,000 PINs were ultimately issued to households across Alberta by the first week of September. As justification for this low-maintenance system, party staffers presupposed PINs sent to homes where original inhabitants had moved, or to incorrect addresses, would simply be “returned to sender” rather than opened and used by other, potentially non-eligible voters.

Of the five campaign teams, only Hugh MacDonald’s team had opened a fully functional campaign office with multiple full-time staff volunteers. Not surprisingly, MacDonald’s team raised the most number of complaints pertaining to voter identification and the potential nonexistence of voters listed on the ALP voters list of combined supporters and members. In an instance of public outcry, MacDonald reported to news media, “I really don’t think any campaign should have to use a séance to get their vote out.” The “séance” reference alluded to MacDonald’s belief the registered supporter list as it had been presented in its finalized form on 19 August 2011, the cutoff for adding supporters, contained dead people, nonresidents of Alberta, noncitizens, and even falsely constructed names.

MacDonald’s reasoning was that because the ALP office had no means of verifying names on the list manually via telephone conversation, and because campaign teams lacked the resources to do so as well, the e-voting voters list was fundamentally open to abuse and falsification. As one reporter noted, “[Hogan]
expected a precise number [of supporters] . . . after the list is scrubbed of duplicates and gag-names” (Gerson, 2011). But as that “scrubbing” process was fairly rudimentary, the ALP e-voting experiment unfolded with no clear or systematic protocol for follow-up confirmation or rejection of eligible voters. (There is no final tally as to how many PINs were ultimately sent, and no final tally on how many returned-to-sender PINs were sent back because of incomplete or incorrect addresses). As one participant in an all-candidates campaign team meeting stated, “This system means I could have just ripped a bunch of pages out of the phone book and submitted those as supporters.” Despite informing Cormican and myself of a fundamental lack of staffing at the ALP office and a lack of resources to perform a systemic survey of names, Hogan nonetheless told the Edmonton Journal: “Nobody who has not proved their identification, either by being at the address that is on the electoral list, or by showing ID, is sent voting information” (Gerson, 2011).

According to Elections Canada, voter identification is one of the key ingredients in a free and fair election. The inability to identify “digital voters” (people who do not show up in person to vote) constitutes a major hiccup, and a preventative obstacle, to the fairness of digital voting (Elections Canada, 1998). One solution might be the introduction of additional technologies, such as “electronic signatures, voice prints, fingerprinting, retina scanning, and smart cards,” all of which are costly. Elections Canada further notes each of the high-tech solutions proposed puts into question the privacy of the voter, given that an inordinate amount of personal and even biological data would need to be collected. The Elections Canada report concludes that although technological innovations might decrease the cost of digital voting mechanisms and identification procedures in the future, “issues related to privacy are more challenging and will require on-going assessment of Canadians’ willingness to use such personal identification devices” (Elections Canada, 1998).

Elections Canada’s assessment does not constitute a complete denial of digital voting possibilities. Critics could rightly point out that in federal and provincial elections in Canada today voter identification is neither guaranteed nor absolute. People without identification can still swear an oath in front of a deputy returning officer and poll clerk and in such (federal) cases they are often granted a ballot; this is, after all, how people with no fixed address (the homeless) can obtain a ballot to vote. In addition, in many jurisdictions in this country, voters who forget their identification cards at home can obtain a ballot by getting neighbors to vouch for the residency and identification of the voter at
the polling site. Most voting mechanisms in Canada are thus open-ended, to ensure as high a voter turnout as possible and to ensure the homeless and economically disadvantaged are not prevented from voting by systemic barriers.

Digital voting, however, does seem to pose more potential sites for abuse, at least when judged by the outcomes of the ALP case study. The lack of a rigorous, systematic voter identification process warrants more attention to this issue at the partisan and general election level for policy-makers in the future.

The Ballot and Casting a Decision
The “current voting process” common across Canada is one in which voters cast their ballot “in person, at the polling station without assistance” (Elections Canada, 1998). The phrase “without assistance” is crucial. In Canadian federal and provincial elections, people with disabilities and people who require aid reading or understanding material on a ballot can use an “aide”: a family member or friend who helps the person vote behind a private screen after taking an oath to abide by the person’s intended desires in helping them to cast a ballot or in casting the ballot on their behalf. Those cases typically constitute a tiny minority of votes overall. The same cannot be said of digital voting.

Because there are no data currently available that demonstrate how many ALP voters, for example, were required to ask a friend, partner, child, neighbour, or fellow ALP member to “help” or “assist” with voting online or telephonically, I rely here on qualitative, lived experiences within my own network of voters as a means of narrating and describing the concern with greater detail.

In my household, two people—my mother and I—obtained ALP PINs allowing us to vote. While my mother does use the Internet, and she does possess reasonable computer skills (she can open a Word document, write a basic letter in English, save it as a PDF, and print it; she can open Skype and chat with her children overseas; she can log into Facebook and post messages to photos uploaded by family members; she can view various reward plans and the points in her reward accounts online, etc.), she still faces technical challenges in navigating new, confusing, or unfamiliar websites. My working hypothesis is that people like my mother are not exceptions even in the highly connected environment of Alberta. There are Albertans like her, of her generation (both native English speakers and English as a Second Language [ESL] speakers), for whom the Internet serves as an occasional toy but not a daily working or leisure tool. Thus, navigating new sites sometimes requires the introduction of new skills when the site exists for the performance of special or irregular tasks such as voting.
In the case of the ALP Internet ballot, the website was unfamiliar in design and purpose. To my mother (and to myself), the positioning of candidates’ names on the ballot screen seemed oddly off centre, the text was too small to be read without reading glasses (or difficulty), and the process of finalizing or confirming the ballot was not immediately clear. In brief, I had to sit by her side to direct her to the appropriate URL, to indicate and explain what was appearing on the website, to help her move the mouse to the oddly placed check boxes, and to read the text explaining what the voter needed to do to enter preferential candidate selections. Finally, I had to guide her on clicking “submit” and closing the browser.

The ALP e-voting mechanism presupposed the process would be seamless and unproblematic for all members and supporters. But for people not fully integrated into contemporary digital culture, “assistance” is required for effective or successful digital voting. In the case of my mother, because my “assistance” was required, I know how she voted. If I were pernicious, I could have swayed her vote at the point of voting, or I could have simply voted for her given my access to her ballot and her trust in my digital skills. I did not have to take an oath in front of a poll director or a member of the party or even another member of my family declaring and confirming that I would not manipulate my mother’s vote as I assisted her in casting her ballot, so there would have been no social opprobrium or pressure to not manipulate my mother had I wanted to. For people hard of hearing or for non-English speakers, the telephone ballot used for the ALP case study would have posed similar obstacles and required similar modes of assistance. The telephone system was operated by a digitized voice in English—factors that would have rendered the audio ballot potentially difficult to understand compared to a paper-based ballot. In sum, voting “without assistance” to ensure the privacy of one’s vote is difficult and often uncertain when the voting mechanisms are digital and thus unfamiliar.

The difficulties manifest in the ALP case study warrant a much more detailed analysis of online or telephone voting in a world where not every citizen or voter is an equally skilled participant in digital culture.

CONCLUSION

The ALP’s “registered supporter” system was meant to grow the party by allowing all Albertans (aged eighteen and over) to vote in the party’s leadership race. On paper, this move extended the network of potential Liberal voters to more than...
two million eligible electors cited on Alberta’s 2008 Electors List. In addition, the party’s digital voting mechanism were supposed to allow for a relatively low cost voting system that would be easy to access, decentralized in nature, and open to all potential Albertans (with an Internet or telephone connection).

Of the approximate 28,000 “supporters” and members who signed up to vote by the end of the four-month leadership campaign, less than one-third (a total of 8,640 voters) actually cast ballots (Bennett, 2011; Kleiss, 2011a). The race did result in more votes cast in an ALP leadership race than ever before. But on a less sanguine note, it cost the party more money than any other leadership race had cost in the history of the party (in relative or absolute terms). Far from the presumed $30,000 price tag, the 2011 ALP leadership registered supporter and e-voting systems cost more than $100,000.

Perhaps more relevant, however, in the seven months that transpired between 10 September 2011 (the leadership vote day) and 23 April 2012 (Alberta’s general election), support for the party waned rather than grew. In fact, it dropped so significantly that the party struggled to fill many constituencies with declared Liberal candidates by the time the writ was dropped by then Premier Alison Redford. The ALP scrambled to recruit and implant salaried ALP or legislative staffers to fill vacant constituency seats, including Ganton (the ALP operations officer) as the candidate for Vermilion-Lloydminster, Jonathan Huckabay (the ALP’s chief of staff at the Legislative Assembly) as the candidate for Edmonton-Manning, and Amy McBain (the ALP’s media liaison officer) as the candidate for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. In the end, ALP leader, Raj Sherman, only managed to announce a full slate of candidates on 7 April 2012 – nearly two weeks into a four-week campaign (Wingrove, 2012).

In sum, the ALP’s experiment with “registered supporters” and digital voting demonstrated a failure to generate interactive community-based support. The prophesied new generation of Albertan voter who would harbour a committed Liberal identity did not materialize. Contrarily, Election Day in April 2012 handed a damaging result to the party, cutting its elected human power in half. The ALP dropped from nine seats in 2008 to a mere five in 2012, continuing a negative trend from 2004, when it had boasted sixteen seats in the Assembly, rather than reversing the tide through voter “renewal.” The ALP lost its status and funding as Official Opposition, and across the province it demonstrated significant loss in popular support, dropping from 26 percent support in 2008 to 10 percent in 2012.
While the number of supporters and members who voted in the leadership race in September 2011 had reached over 8,000, by April 2012 the ALP’s own membership base had dropped back down to under 3,000 names, and it continued to pale in comparison to the Progressive Conservatives’ more than 40,000 paid members. The “new generation” of Albertan Liberal that Swann, Ambtman, and Hogan had claimed would be attracted to the party by virtue of its innovative voting systems had not materialized. By contrast, democratic principles enshrined in the party’s constitution in the one-person, one-vote principle and the assurance of anonymity of votes cast were weakened profoundly.

Far from being a panacea, digitally based voting in combination with broad-based voting systems reliant on digital registration systems for outreach require greater scrutiny, planning, financial investment, and neutral oversight to ensure gaps and obstacles manifested in the ALP case study do not unwittingly undo or dissuade voter engagement in Canadian elections (partisan or public) over the long term.

NOTES

1 Note the review of news sources and media rhetoric offered above is not a comprehensive one. A further review of journalistic discourse related to the perceived “youth”-driven NDP surge in Québec in the federal election is also of relevance, as those cultural constructions further supported the emergence within the ALP of a youth-oriented, digital-technologies-motivated, social-media-driven “renewal” agenda.

2 In the interest of full disclosure, I will also add that in December 2011, four months after the conclusion of the ALP leadership race that saw MLA Raj Sherman elected to lead the ALP by members and supporters, I won the nomination as the ALP candidate in Edmonton-Gold Bar, where I lost in the province’s general election on 23 April 2012 to the Progressive Conservative candidate David Dorward.

3 In 2011, McIver sought and won the nomination to run as the Progressive Conservative candidate in Calgary-Hays, where he was elected to the Alberta legislature in 2012.

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