



The Political Influence Industry **in** Canada

An Open Media Report

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Introduction

Elections in Canada, and most other democratic countries, are not just fought out between political parties and their candidates. They are also the result of a struggle between a large, and largely invisible, number of companies that comprise what we call the “**Political Influence Industry.**”

Readers will probably be familiar with the name Cambridge Analytica, the disgraced company that manipulated the data used by the Trump campaign in the 2016 election. They will also be aware of the extensive targeting of political ads through Facebook and other social media networks. The role of social media and digital campaigning has reached the widespread attention of the media, government regulators, and various civil society organizations.

It is commonly assumed that extensive and refined data on the electorate is now indispensable for the modern election campaign. If data helps win elections, then who helps parties collect it, and analyze it? And who helps them determine how, and to whom, their communications should be targeted?

Despite this increased attention, however, most of the companies that work for parties and candidates remain shrouded in secrecy. We know that the Political Influence Industry is extensive. And we see the results in the form of increasingly targeted ads. But who are these companies? What do they do? Who do they work for? And what are the political, legal, and social implications?

This report aims to shed light on the extent and nature of the Political Influence Industry in Canada – to draw the curtain back, and to attempt to reveal the network of companies, big and small, employed by Canada’s political parties during and between election campaigns. The party political battle is the tip of an iceberg. ***What does that iceberg look like beneath the surface?***

This work is largely inspired by the broader Political Influence project conducted by **Tactical Tech**. Launched in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2019, this project shares research on how political influence is exerted worldwide. It conducts workshops through its Learning Hub to support the capacity of professionals and regulators who monitor elections and campaigns. And it supports digital and political literacy for engaged citizens.



Political influence is conducted through an industry of consultants, technology companies, and platforms. The role of the industry in politics is extensive, shrouded in mystery, and can have serious consequences for our political experience and consequently social and economic life.

— *Tactical Tech*

This mapping of the Political Influence Industry in Canada has never been attempted before. It is the product of a collaboration between Professor Colin Bennett of the University of Victoria, and the team at OpenMedia. Hopefully, this research will also inform the continuing debates in Canada about how better to regulate the collection, use, and disclosure of personal data by political parties at federal and provincial levels. Unlike many other democratic countries, parties in Canada are generally not regulated under Canada’s privacy protection laws, nor overseen by Canada’s federal and provincial regulators. We explain the regulatory gaps below, and discuss the broader problems arising from those gaps in the conclusion.

In the body of the report, we profile this industry, try to categorise it, and give key examples from public sources about what it does. As Tactical Tech **notes**: “Political influence is conducted through an industry of consultants, technology companies, and platforms. The role of the industry in politics is extensive, shrouded in mystery, and can have serious consequences for our political experience and consequently social and economic life.”

We hope that this attempt to draw back the curtain will inform Canadians about this industry, and stimulate a widespread debate about our democracy, and the role of digital campaigning within it. The need for this larger conversation has become even more urgent as various forms of synthetic content created by AI (images, video, and text) enter Canadian political campaigns. **The marriage of data analytics and Artificial Intelligence** is potentially the new frontier of election campaigning, making the need for transparency, accountability, and informed debate even more pressing.

Privacy Protection Law & Political Influence

Personal information in the form of processable data is invaluable to political parties. While parties may have traditionally run campaigns by canvassing voters door to door or using contact information from a voter list to solicit memberships or donations, **our data-focused world today changes the entire game.**



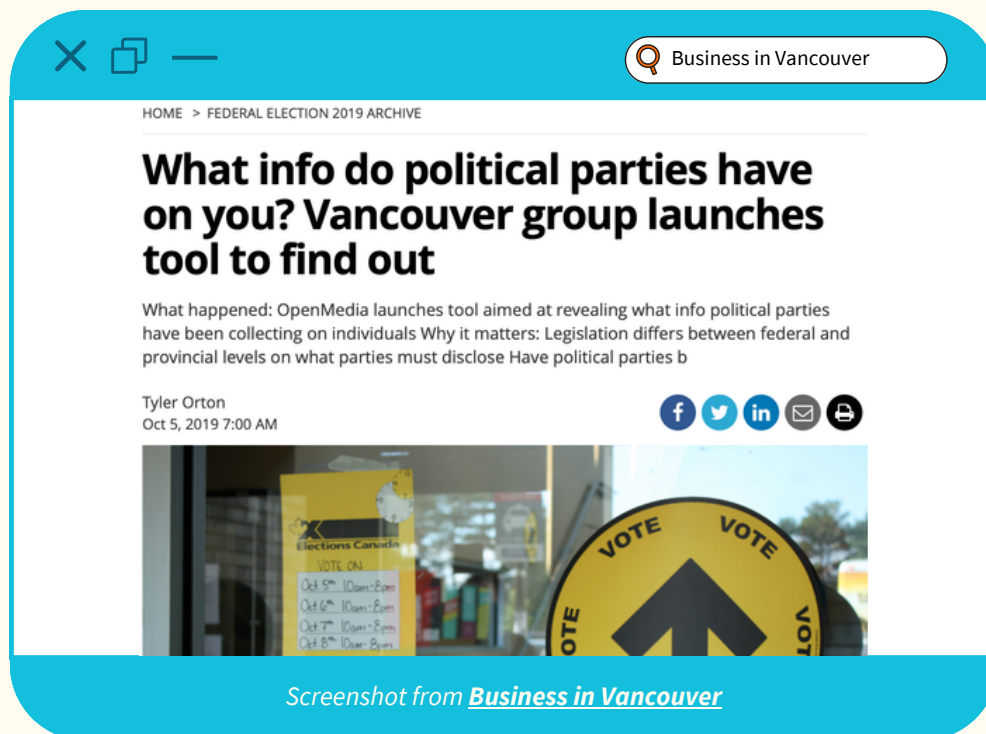
Parties now have access to vast swathes of data and can sort them in fractions of a second to create micro-targeted advertising aimed at nudging undecided voters toward their party, away from the opposition, or away from voting at all. The integration of artificial intelligence in election campaigns has made processing and mobilizing voter data **even easier**. Especially critical is the ability to relate a voter's activity online to the so-called ground game – and vice versa.

So, how does Canada make sure that political parties are acting responsibly with the personal information under their control?

Federal Political Parties (FPPs) in Canada are in a unique position with regard to the application of privacy law. Federal privacy laws as they exist today do not apply to them. The application of provincial privacy laws is currently an open question. This regulatory gap means that FPPs are free to collect, use, and disclose personal information in essentially any way they please so long as they abide by their own policies, that they themselves write under some incredibly weak provisions in the Canada Elections Act.

Experiences with Cambridge Analytica’s manipulation of the 2016 United States presidential election through use of voters’ personal information on social media illustrate just how powerful access to vast swathes of data can be. Political parties are thus incentivized to maintain access to **data-based voter relationship management (VRM) platforms** to gain or maintain a competitive edge over other parties. Coupling that incentive with the fact that political parties themselves actually make Canada’s laws, the parties have engaged together in **cartel-like behaviour** to pass legislation that ensures they remain exempted from laws that affect the vast majority of public and private organizations in Canada.

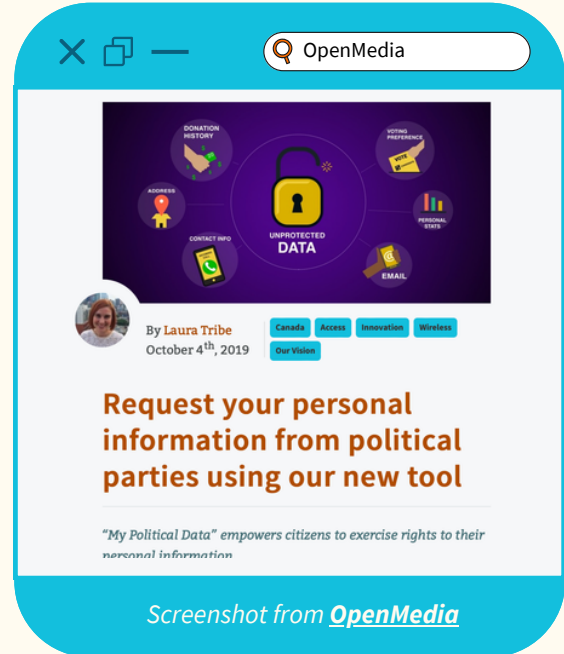
Calls for reform to this exception have gained traction, with ongoing court battles in British Columbia and public engagement and awareness campaigns spreading the word to Canadians. Government organizations, including the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada (OPC), Chief Electoral Officer, and the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy, and Ethics (ETHI) have called for application of privacy law to FPPs. Following this advice is essential as digital technologies continue to influence Canadian political campaigns.



Screenshot from [Business in Vancouver](#)

Privacy law and political parties: The regulatory gap

At present, Canada’s federal privacy laws do not apply to FPPs. The Privacy Act applies only to a specific schedule of Federal government bodies, which does not include FPPs. The Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) only applies to **organizations engaged in commercial activity**. Notably, FPPs do engage in a great deal of activity that might be regarded as “commercial” – but it is not enough to bring their campaigning activities within PIPEDA’s ambit. While the OPC has recommended that data held by FPPs be protected by some kind of federal privacy law, former Privacy Commissioner Daniel Therrien’s **analysis of PIPEDA** resulted in an opinion that the law simply does not, in its current form, express an intention to cover FPPs.



Not even Canada’s anti-spam legislation (CASL) covers FPPs. They are specifically exempted from any of CASL’s requirements on electronic communication through the Electronic Commerce Protection Regulations at section 3(h). This leaves the Canada Elections Act (CEA) as the only piece of federal law that covers FPPs with regard to the protection of personal information in their control, and it is decidedly not a privacy law.

Since the Elections Modernization Act was passed in 2018, FPPs are required under the CEA at section 385(2)(k) to submit their respective policies on protection of personal information to the Chief Electoral Officer. The policy must then be made publicly available and be easily understandable. While the CEA requires parties to have certain elements in their policies, like descriptions of the ways they collect, protect, use, and perhaps sell personal information in their control, it is not a privacy law. There is no oversight to ensure that their policies align with privacy principles, laws, or even best practices. There are also no penalties for breaches of those policies.

This setup is completely inadequate. It empowers FPPs to continue doing exactly what they have done in the past: create open-ended methods of collection, use, and disclosure that allow them to do anything they want with voters’ personal information with almost no liability or oversight. Worse, the parties themselves are the ones that make the laws, and they are disincentivized from pushing for privacy law to apply to them. If they are unable to use personal information of voters in any way they please, they lose the ability to target voters in any way they please. With federal law inadequate, we turn to the provinces.

The applicability of provincial privacy laws

Two provinces have privacy laws that could potentially apply to FPPs: Québec’s [Law 25](#) and British Columbia’s [Personal Information Protection Act](#) (PIPA). Both are substantially similar to the federal PIPEDA. Québec’s Law 25 explicitly includes political parties in its ambit.

The BC Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (BC OIPC) [has already investigated](#) the practices of provincial political parties, and issued a [code of practice](#) and [guidance on political campaign activity](#), jointly with the BC Chief Electoral Officer. So the precedent has been set. If provincial parties were covered, then why not FPPs as well, when they collect personal data in BC?



Screenshot from [CBC News](#)

In 2019, three BC citizens, supported by the Centre for Digital Rights, sought access to the personal information the FPPs held about them. In 2020, the BC OIPC started an investigation. The federal Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP then challenged the BC OIPC’s jurisdiction. They argued that PIPA did not apply for three reasons: that the provinces did not have jurisdiction over them because of their federal character, that parties were not “organizations” under PIPA, and that PIPA itself was not constitutional for infringing voting rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In March 2022, the BC OIPC released an opinion authored by the Commissioner’s delegate, David Loukidelis. He concluded that **PIPA did indeed** apply to FPPs. The most important element of the decision was that, in the absence of a national privacy regime that applied to FPPs, British Columbia was free to legislate. The federal Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP each requested judicial review seeking to quash the Loukidelis decision and declare that BC *PIPA* does not apply to them. Following a number of delays, this review was finally heard by the BC Supreme Court in April 2024.

On May 14th, 2024, Justice Weatherill released **a 60 page opinion** which comprehensively rejected all the constitutional arguments of the FPPs. The judge acknowledged the larger concern: “The rapid advancement of technological tools allowing for the harvesting of private information for the purpose of profiling and micro-targeting voters has created risks of misuse of personal information that could result in erosion of trust in our political system” (para 2). Stressing the importance of the privacy and autonomy of voters for democratic practice, he went on to note that “the Parliament of Canada has yet to take significant action. The Legislature of British Columbia has.” (para 3). He went on to underline that “*PIPA* provides a measure of accountability for FPPs’ privacy practices, a matter on which *CEA* is silent” (para 203).

According to this landmark decision, there is no operational conflict between *PIPA* and the provisions in the *CEA*. The BC law applies to the FPPs, and the BC OIPC can legitimately investigate their practices.



The rapid advancement of technological tools allowing for the harvesting of private information for the purpose of profiling and micro-targeting voters has created risks of misuse of personal information that could result in erosion of trust in our political system (para 2).

— paragraph 2, ruling by BC Supreme Court
Justice Weatherill, *Liberal Party of Canada v The Complainants*, 2024 BCSC 814

The inadequate amendments to the Canada Elections Act

In 2023, the Liberal government included a brief amendment to the CEA in its *Budget Implementation Act* (Bill C-47), buried at section 680. The effect of the amendment was to attempt to label the provisions in the CEA regarding the existence and availability of parties' policies on protection of personal information as a "national, uniform, exclusive, and complete" privacy regime. The goal was to make *PIPA* functionally inapplicable to FPPs — because there is a federal law on the same topic, the federal law would be paramount and the provincial law inapplicable.

These provisions of the CEA are not equivalent to the privacy laws to which other public and private bodies are subject. There remains no oversight by a privacy commissioner or other independent body. All FPPs have open-ended lists of reasons for which they are able to collect personal information and share it with third parties. That is to say, FPPs write their own privacy laws, and give themselves no limits to the collection, use, or disclosure of personal information — so long as they are transparent about it.



Furthering the efforts of C-47, the Liberal government introduced **Bill C-65**, the *Electoral Participation Act*, on March 20, 2024. Just like C-47 before it, C-65 declares that the CEA’s provisions related to FPPs’ privacy policies constitute a “national, uniform, exclusive and complete regime”. While it introduces some administrative monetary penalties when parties breach their policies, it still lacks the oversight of a privacy commissioner or other independent body. It also relies again on having parties pen their own privacy policies, with no consistent controls over what information can be collected, how it might be used, and to whom it may be disclosed. Bill C-65 says nothing about individual consent. It provides for no rights of access and correction.

Canada needs a comprehensive privacy law that applies to FPPs, and Bill C-65 is not it. Without jurisdiction to inspect the practices of FPPs, Canadians may never actually know what personal information parties are collecting, how they’re using it, who they are transferring it over to for third party processing, or even what those third parties are doing with the data once it is in their control.

It should also be stressed that both amendments have a very broad reach. Section 680 states: “In order to participate in public affairs by endorsing one or more of its members as candidates and supporting their election, any registered party or eligible party, as well as **any person or organization acting on the party’s behalf**, including the party’s candidates, electoral district associations, officers, agents, employees, volunteers and representatives, may, subject to this Act and any other applicable federal Act, collect, use, disclose, retain and dispose of personal information in accordance with the party’s privacy policy” (our emphasis).

These weak privacy policies are intended, therefore, to extend to the entire campaign ecosystem – an important implication which we discuss later.



Canada needs a comprehensive privacy law that applies to FPPs, and Bill C-65 is not it.

The campaign for reform

There have been calls for reform of this inadequate privacy policy framework from the OPC, the Chief Electoral Officer, the House of Commons ETHI Committee, academic experts, and civil society organizations.

The OPC saw the gap in application of privacy law to FPPs and issued voluntary guidance to parties in 2019. The guidance suggested that, in designing their privacy policies, FPPs should follow **ten privacy principles** that underpin international privacy laws, including Canada's *PIPEDA*. The Chief Electoral Officer has similarly **recommended** that FPPs abide by these same privacy principles, with oversight by the OPC. Assessment of the parties' policies against these principles suggests that parties fail **at least six** of the ten principles based on the wording of their policies alone. The failures are under the principles of accountability, identifying purposes, consent, openness, individual access, and challenging compliance. The failures generally stem from the fact that all parties' policies are based on open-ended lists with no limit on how parties collect, use, or disclose personal information. For example, consent to collection for specific purposes is impossible if those purposes are not specifically communicated.

In 2019, in response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to information, Privacy and Ethics (ETHI) **recommended**: "that the Government of Canada take measures to ensure that privacy legislation applies to political activities in Canada, either by amending existing legislation or enacting new legislation."

The same was **recommended** by the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee in 2023.

Privacy Principles:

1 Accountability ✗

2 Identifying Purposes ✗

3 Consent ✗

4 Limiting Collection ?

5 Limiting Use, Disclosure, and Retention ?

6 Accuracy ?

7 Safeguards ?

8 Openness ✗

9 Individual Access ✗

10 Challenging Compliance ✗



OpenMedia has been vocal on the topic, creating engagement campaigns and raising awareness of the regulatory gap. Their actions have resulted in over 1700 individuals requesting their personal data from political parties. **OpenMedia also conducted a comparison of the FPPs privacy policies** against the national information privacy principles in PIPEDA, and exposed the obvious gaps and inadequacies. **Public opinion surveys** have further registered both a general surprise that political parties are not covered by our privacy laws, and overwhelming support for bringing them within the regulatory framework.

Federal political parties are about the only category of organization in Canada, where citizens do not enjoy some fundamental and enforceable privacy rights. In their efforts to legislate a lax system that amounts to little more than self-regulation, the FPPs are in an inherent conflict of interest.

This inadequate coverage has implications for the many organizations that process personal information on behalf of the FPPs. As we explain below, the current situation is not only inadequate, it is also highly confusing.

Our Methodology

The **research phase of this project** focused on compiling an inventory of the companies, products, and consultancies that work in the Political Influence Industry for Canadian federal, provincial, and municipal political parties.

We sought to capture companies whose work was connected with the collection, analysis, manipulation, or use of *data* on behalf of political parties at federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels. This included personal information collected by political parties about individual Canadians, as well as broader datasets pertaining to Canadian voters' socio-economic demographics, characteristics, or political views.

This meant scoping out companies who are active in Canada, but where we couldn't find evidence of a link with one or more political parties. We also excluded companies whose work appeared limited to advertising, communications, fundraising, or marketing, when such work did not involve interaction with personal data.

Given the challenges we faced with our research, we very likely ended up excluding some companies who ought to have been included. Despite this, the fact that we identified nearly 100 companies in scope for our project indicates that the size of the Canadian Political Influence Industry is far larger than most voters realize.

We used a range of primary and secondary sources to identify and research companies in scope for our project. These are discussed in more detail below.

Primary Sources:

Our primary sources comprised election spending reports and the companies' own published material, for example their websites and social media feeds.

Election Spending Reports

We reviewed election spending reports for the two most recent elections at federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels. We included 12 of Canada's largest municipalities: Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Mississauga, Brampton, Hamilton, Saskatoon, and Regina.

We found that the usefulness of these spending reports varied dramatically from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In general, all jurisdictions require granular reporting of donations — for example, federal political parties are required to publicly disclose the identity of all donors who contribute \$200 or more.

By contrast, we found that most jurisdictions do not require granular reporting of *spending* — Alberta, for example, simply requires parties to disclose the total amount they spent on broad categories of campaign expenses. We know the governing United Conservative Party **spent \$237,265.26** on “Polling (opinion surveys, market research)” in the 2023 provincial election, but there is no way to identify — at least not from the Elections Alberta reporting — on which companies this money was spent.

In neighbouring Saskatchewan, however, the picture is much clearer, thanks to Elections Saskatchewan's far more granular reporting requirements for election spending. Not only can we tell that the opposition Saskatchewan NDP **spent** a total of \$349,884.36 on “Advertising” in the 2020 provincial election, we also find a detailed breakdown of how this money was spent (see pages 5 & 6 of their **financial return**).

Unfortunately, Saskatchewan proved far more often to be the exception rather than the rule in this regard — although both **New Brunswick** and, more recently, **British Columbia**, deserve credit for the granularity of their expense reporting requirements.

Canadians rightly expect granular reporting of election contributions as a vital element of transparency in their electoral system. But to ensure true transparency when it comes to Canada's growing Political Influence Industry, we need all jurisdictions, at federal, provincial, and municipal levels, to require similar granularity when it comes to reporting of election expenses — a matter we'll return to later in the conclusions section of this report.

Material published by Influence Industry companies:

Once a company popped up on our ‘radar’ — for example after being named in an election spending report — a logical next step was to check out their websites, social media presences, and other published material.

Although the level of detail here varied, in many cases this enabled us to determine whether or not a company was in scope for this project, and to learn more about the types of work they were engaged in.

In turn, this enabled us to categorize the various activities that fell under the broad umbrella of “Political Influence” — for example, conducting sophisticated data analytics, building targeted voter contact tools, or simply providing raw datasets. Some companies specialized in just one of these activities, while others prided themselves on offering the full package, or something close to it. We’ll examine this in more depth in our next section.

Secondary Sources:

Given the flaws and inconsistencies of Canada’s election spending reporting requirements, secondary sources proved essential for the research phase of this project. These included:

Review of academic papers, literature, and other publications:

The Political Influence Industry in Canada, and issues adjacent to it, has been the subject of a certain amount of academic study over recent years. We reviewed this literature both with an eye to better understanding how companies active in the industry interact with political parties and with each other, as well as to identify companies who may not have cropped up in primary sources such as election spending reports.

A full bibliography is set out later in this report, but especially helpful publications included, in no particular order, Elizabeth Dubois & Taylor Owen’s [Understanding the Digital Ecosystem: Findings from the 2019 Election](#), Colin Bennett and Jesse Gordon’s [Understanding the “Micro” in Political Micro-Targeting](#), and Susan Delacourt’s indispensable book [Shopping for Votes](#).

Additionally, we sought to build on previously-conducted research into the Political Influence Industry, not least Tactical Tech’s [Influence Industry Project](#) which, while global in scope, identified several Canadian companies for further investigation.

Review of relevant media coverage:

Given the privacy risks posed by political parties' data collection practices, issues surrounding the Canadian Political Influence Industry have often been the topic of media coverage.

Casting our net back to 2017, we reviewed media coverage on topics including the loss or mishandling of personal information by political parties, times when political parties put such data to questionable use, as well as more policy-driven stories about what obligations political parties should have when it comes to handling private data.

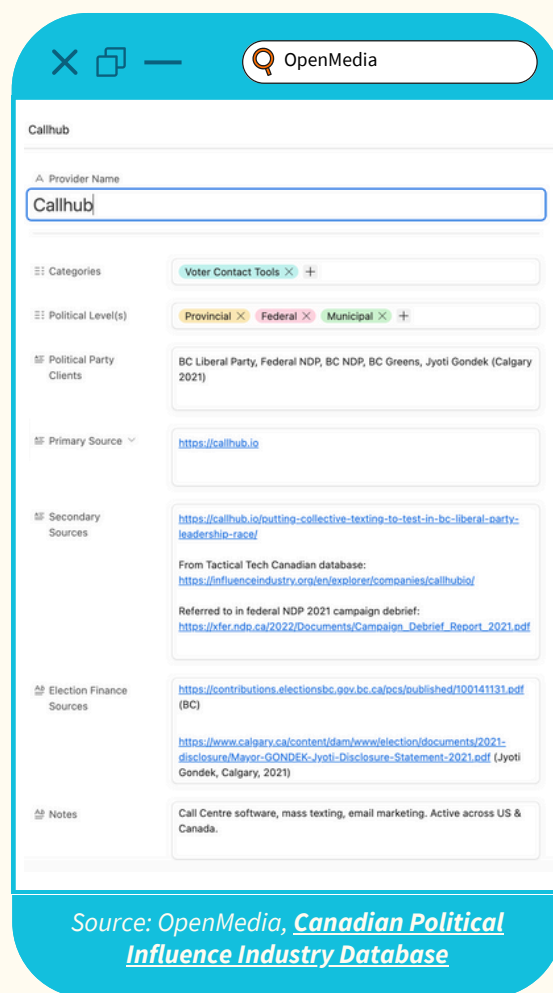
These stories were helpful both in growing understanding of how the Influence Industry operates, as well as in identifying companies for further investigation. Notably helpful on the latter front were 'insider' takes, often published after polling day, about how X party won Y election, as these articles often named the key companies and actors involved.

Constructing the Database:

Having investigated a number of alternatives, we decided to build our underlying database in **AirTable**, as this offered the advantages of a spreadsheet-style interface, but with greater flexibility than traditional spreadsheet apps such as Microsoft Excel or Apple Numbers.

Notable advantages included the ease of assigning multiple categories to a single spreadsheet cell, enabling us to accommodate companies who, say, operated at both federal and provincial levels, or who engaged in two or more categories of Political Influence activities.

Additionally, AirTable is easily searchable, and offers a powerful filtering mechanism to enable users to 'zoom in' on companies that meet multiple specified criteria. This was important to us, as we wanted to ensure we could publish a database that was accessible and easy-to-use alongside this report, as well as one that would lend itself to being used as an underlying layer for visualization tools.



The Database

✕ □ — 🔍 OpenMedia

14	Callfire	Voter Contact Tools	Provincial	BC NDP (2020)	https://www.callfire.com/...	Elections BC (2020): https://cont...
15	Callhub	Voter Contact Tools	Provincial Federal Municipal	BC Liberal Party, Federal N...	https://callhub.io About u...	Tactical Tech profile: https://in... Elections BC (2020): https://cont...
16	Campaign Research	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling Comms / Marketing / Adver	Provincial Municipal	Ontario PCs (2022) & John ...	https://www.campaignres...	Susan Delacourt, Shopping fo...
17	Campaign Support Ltd.	Comms / Marketing / Advertising Data Analytics / Intelligence / P	Federal	Federal Conservatives (201...	https://www.campaignsu...	Elections Canada (CPC, 2019): ht...
18	Canada Post	Data Source	Federal	Major federal parties	https://www.canadapost-...	National Post: https://national...
19	Canada411 Phone Directory	Data Source	Federal	Federal Conservatives	https://www.canada411.ca/	Toronto Star: https://www.the...
20	Canvassr	Voter Contact Tools	Municipal	Mark Sutcliffe for Ottawa M...	https://appadvice.com/ga...	https://marksutcliffe.ca/canva...
21	Civis Analytics	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling	Federal	Federal Liberals (2015)	https://www.civisanalytics...	Susan Delacourt, Shopping fo...
22	CIMS (Constituent Information Mana...	VRM Systems	Federal Provincial	Federal Conservatives, Ont...		Bennett, Colin & Michael McD...
23	Coaliste	Voter Contact Tools VRM Systems	Provincial	Coalition Avenir Québec (C...	https://coaliste.org/	Montreal Gazette: https://mon...
24	Colour Creative Persuasion	Comms / Marketing / Advertising Data Analytics / Intelligence / P	Provincial	New Brunswick PCs (2018)	https://colour.ca/ https://c...	Elections New Brunswick (2018): ...
25	Community	Voter Contact Tools	Federal	Federal Liberals, Federal NDP	https://www.community.c...	CTV News: https://www.ctvne...
26	Compass Analytics Inc.	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling VRM Systems	Federal	Federal Conservatives (2021)	https://www.compassdat...	Elections Canada (CPC, 2021): ht...
27	Constant Contact	Voter Contact Tools	Provincial	New Brunswick PCs (2020)	https://www.constantcont...	Elections New Brunswick (2020):...
☐ ↗	Dandelion	Voter Contact Tools	Federal Provincial	Federal NDP, BC NDP, Sask...	https://dandelion.run/app/...	National Post: https://national... Elections Saskatchewan (2020): ...
29	Data Axle Canada (formerly InfoCan...	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling Data Source Voter Conta	Federal	Federal Liberals, Conservati...	https://www.dataaxlecana...	National Post: https://national...
30	Data Sciences Inc.	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling Comms / Marketing / Adver	Federal Provincial	Federal Liberals (2021), NB ...	https://datasciences.ca/o...	Bennett, Colin, "Data-Driven ... Elections Canada (2021, LPC): ht...
31	Decide Campaigns	Comms / Marketing / Advertising Data Analytics / Intelligence / P	Municipal Provincial	Jyoti Gondek (Calgary, 202...	https://www.decidecamp...	Politics Today: https://www.pg... Elections Calgary (2021): https://l...
32	Demokratik	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling Fundraising Voter Conta	Federal Provincial Municipal	Bloc Quebecois (2021), Fed...	https://www.demokratik.o...	Political party clients are liste... Elections Canada (BQ, 2021): htt...
33	Electright	Voter Contact Tools Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling	Federal Provincial Municipal	Federal Conservatives (202...	https://www.electright.ca/...	Elections Canada (CPC, 2021): ht...
34	Environics Analytics / PRIZM5	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling Data Source	Federal Provincial	Federal Conservatives, Fed...	https://environicsanalytic...	Bennett, Colin & Michael McD...
35	Experian	Data Analytics / Intelligence / Polling Data Source	None Identified	Experian is a data broker th...	https://www.experian.co...	The Markup (re use by US ca...

Source: OpenMedia, [Canadian Political Influence Industry Database](#)

The Scope & Size of the Political Influence Industry in Canada

Overall, we identified 91 companies who met the criteria of:

- ➔ Being recently active in Canada;
- ➔ Having one or more political party clients at federal, provincial, or municipal level;
- ➔ Engaging in one or more activities connected with the Influence Industry.

For the reasons outlined in the methodology section above, this number is very likely an underestimate. Given the patchy and inconsistent nature of election spending reporting requirements across many jurisdictions — including very large ones like Ontario and Québec — there are almost certainly several active companies not currently captured in our database.

Nevertheless, it's unlikely that we only succeeded in capturing the tip of the iceberg, and we ended up with a sample size sufficient to enable us to start examining the nature of the Canadian Influence Industry as a whole.

Let's start by setting out some of our key 'big picture' findings before digging deeper into some specific case studies of companies active in this field.

Pattern across federal, provincial, and municipal levels:

Of the 91 companies identified, and bearing in mind that several companies operate at multiple jurisdictional levels, we found evidence of:

- 58 companies active at the federal level, 30 exclusively at this level
- 49 companies active at the provincial level, 18 exclusively at this level
- 26 companies active at the municipal level, 7 exclusively at this level

Categories of work conducted by the Political Influence Industry in Canada:

As the project progressed, it became clear that there were a number of distinct categories of work being carried out by companies engaged in the Canadian Political Influence Industry:



Data Analytics, Intelligence, and Polling: These companies specialize in analyzing data to produce intelligence relevant to the activities of political parties — for example, identifying key demographics for fundraising, voter contact, or targeted communications. Several of these companies also conduct their own polling, or related activities such as focus groups.



Data Sources: These companies act as a source for raw data, which range from basic information (such as names, addresses, and phone numbers), to more sophisticated demographic data.



Social Media Ad Platforms: These companies — often large household names like Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter (X) — not only act as advertising platforms for political parties, but also as both a source and a repository for voter data. For example, parties may wish to narrowly target a particular advert to voters interested in a specific topic, or only to voters who speak a certain language. Parties can even upload their own voter data to ad platforms to target ‘lookalike’ demographics. Additionally, these ad platforms act as a data source for political parties — for example, in tracking the performance of ads and social media posts across key demographics.



Voter Contact Tools: These are tools used by parties to directly contact voters, whether by phone, email, text messaging, or door-to-door canvassing. They are often most effectively used in conjunction with other tools on this list — for example, a list of likely swing voters may be pulled from a VRM before a contact tool is used to reach out and seek to persuade them.



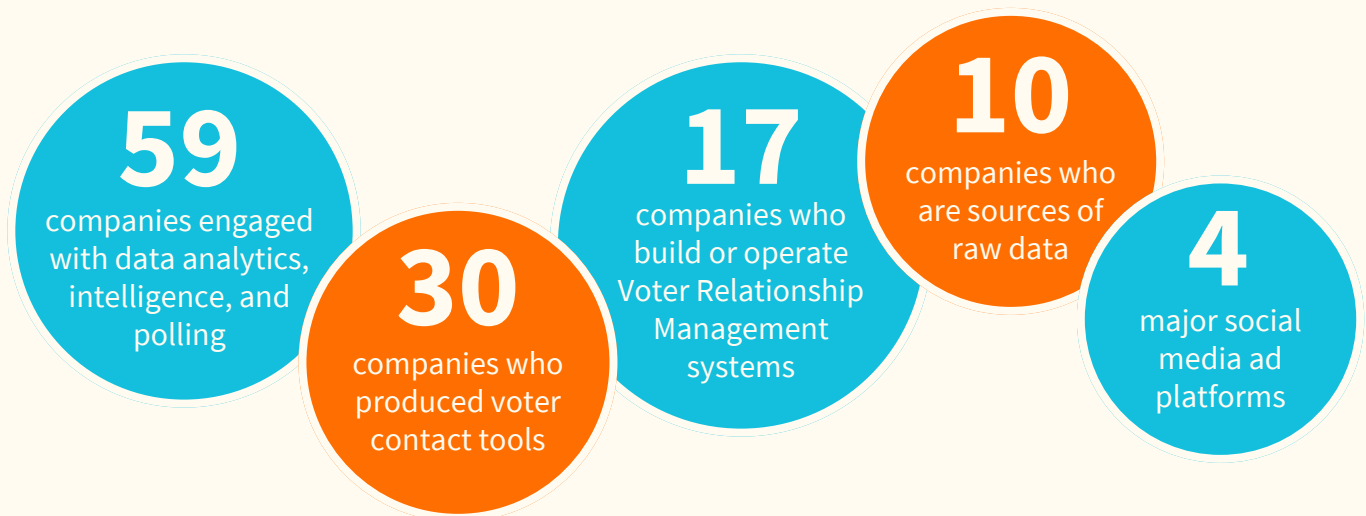
Voter Relationship Management Systems (VRMs): These are the large voter databases maintained by most political parties, and contain information about individual voters compiled from a vast range of sources — including other tools on this list, online petitions, impressions gleaned by door-to-door canvassers, etc.

We also added two additional categories, which are self-explanatory: Fundraising, and Communications/Marketing/Advertising. Many of the companies we identified perform one or both of these additional functions in conjunction with one or more of the functions listed above.

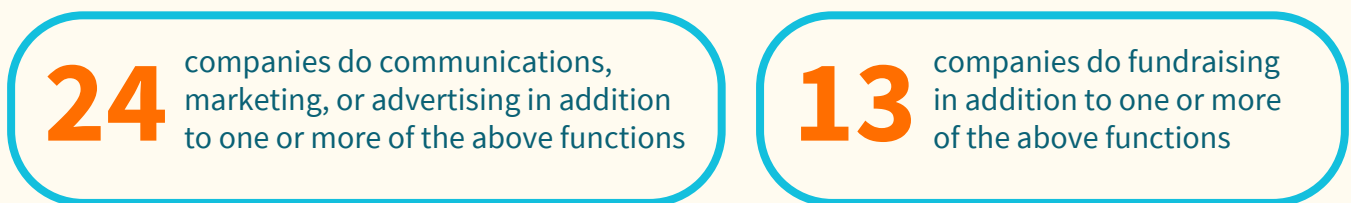
Note that companies which *only* engaged in communications, fundraising, marketing, or advertising and did not *also engage* in one of the functions listed above were excluded from the scope of this project.

Of the 91 companies identified, roughly two-thirds engaged with more than one of the above. Larger companies often fell into more than one category: the same firm might conduct data analysis and then construct a targeted voter marketing campaign based on the results. Smaller companies tended to be more narrowly specialized.

Bearing that in mind, we found:



In addition:



Additional high-level observations:

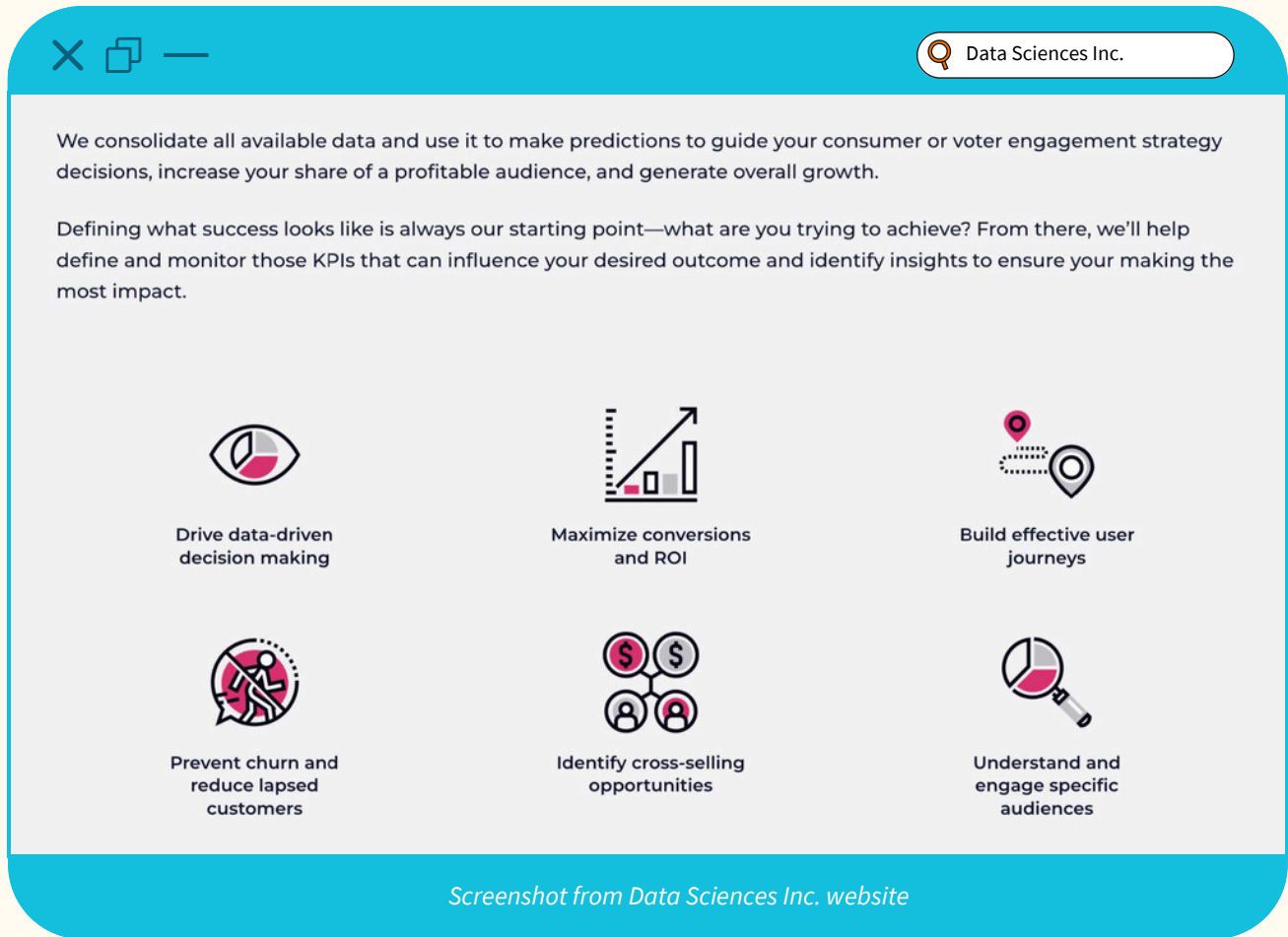
- ➔ This was a very diverse sample, with a lot of variety in terms of size (ranging from large, well-established firms to tiny one or two-person operations), geographic focus (from highly-local to nationwide), and categories of work (from narrowly-specialized to full-service).
- ➔ Many Political Influence Industry companies work exclusively for parties with a shared ideological perspective — e.g. only for conservative-leaning or progressive-leaning parties. This was despite the fact that political parties in Canada do not map precisely across federal, provincial, and municipal levels — in BC, for example, which lacks an established centrist party at the provincial level, federal Liberal voters have long split their votes between the main centre-left and centre-right options at provincial elections.
- ➔ There is often a revolving door of personnel between companies engaged in the Political Influence Industry and their political party clients. It was striking just how many of the companies we identified were founded and/or led by people who were previously political party staffers. This tends to reinforce the close ties between Influence Industry companies and their political party clients.

Case Studies

Having looked at the bigger picture, let's now take a deeper dive into some specific case studies from our database. We'll start by looking at two well-established firms — **Data Sciences Inc. and Responsive Marketing Group** — with close ties to Canada's governing Liberal Party and opposition Conservative Party respectively.

Case Study: Data Sciences Inc.

Data Sciences Inc., ([database entry](#), [website](#)) is closely aligned with the federal Liberal Party of Canada and various provincial Liberal parties, and plays a prominent role in Canada's Political Influence Industry, with multiple references to its activities in both media [reporting](#) and academic [literature](#). Established by Tom Pitfield, a childhood friend of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the company stands at the intersection of data analysis, public opinion research, and strategic communication.



Screenshot from Data Sciences Inc. website

By harnessing the power of data analytics and predictive modelling, Data Sciences enables the Liberal Party to anticipate voter preferences, identify emerging trends, and adapt its messaging and outreach efforts in real-time — at one point even **polling** voters for their views on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s beard.

Its multifaceted operations encompass data analytics, communications, and fundraising campaigns, among other activities — using insights gleaned from the Liberal Party’s trove of personal voter data to build what it **describes** as “creative and digital marketing campaigns with advanced segmentation and automation that allow your data to drive results.”

Although they do not list their political clients on their website, election finance reports confirm Data Sciences’ recent work for both the **federal** and the provincial **New Brunswick** Liberals. Data Sciences also worked for the provincial Ontario Liberals from 2013-2018 — but in that case, we needed to rely on **media reporting**, as Ontario’s election spending reporting is insufficiently granular.

Case Study: Responsive Marketing Group (RMG)

Responsive Marketing Group (RMG) ([database entry](#), [website](#)) is a voter contact and marketing agency based in Toronto, Ontario. It positions itself as a “proud partner of Canada’s Conservative movement,” listing the federal Conservative Party and a number of provincial Conservative parties (Alberta, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Saskatchewan) on its [website](#).

Marketing themselves as a “*conservative campaign solution*,” RMG offers services including SMS voter outreach, Live Voter ID and GOTV Calling, Facebook advertising, and automated messaging and survey calling. RMG leverages behavioural, psychographic, demographic, and transactional data for its targeted fundraising and voter contact campaigns:



Screenshot from RMG's website

Notably, RMG also played a pivotal role in developing the **Constituent Information Management System** (CIMS) for the Conservative Party of Canada. CIMS is a Voter Relationship Management tool that has been used in election campaigns for over 20 years. Launched in 2004, it stores data gathered through phone calls, door-to-door canvassing and many other means. The personal information stored by CIMS is sufficiently detailed for it to assign scores to individual voters, enabling tailored donation requests and hyper-targeted election outreach. This strategy has significantly contributed to the Conservative Party's financial reserves by encouraging repeated small donations.

RMG is quite open about its work for conservative political parties, and appears a number of times in both **federal** and provincial (**New Brunswick, Saskatchewan**) election finance reports. Again, however, although we know RMG also works for conservative parties in Alberta and Ontario, they do not appear in election spending reports for those provinces, due to their lack of granularity.

More specialized case study examples:

Data Sciences Inc. and Responsive Marketing Group are examples of companies that offer a broad spectrum of services related to the Political Influence Industry. These are firms which can not only collect data, but also analyze it, and translate it into targeted voter communication campaigns.

At the other end of the spectrum, several of the companies we identified play a much narrower and more specialized role in the Influence Industry.

Here are some illustrative examples...

Case Study: Populus (Voter Relationship Management)

Populus ([database entry](#), [website](#)) is a Voter Relationship Management tool used by the New Democratic Party (NDP) at both federal and provincial levels. In use since **at least 2015**, when it replaced the older NDP Vote database, it is **described** by the party itself as “central to all NDP campaigns,” and tutorials in its use being offered to NDP activists provincially and federally. “*Learn the basics of pulling reports, printing canvas sheets, data entry, and more!*” encourages this Ontario NDP “Populus 101” [invite to activists](#).

Ensure that your riding is set up correctly

After logging in, click in the icon in the top right corner.

User Information	
Username	jsingh
User	Riding Volunteer
Permission	
Outreach	
Campaign	
Region	
Constit.	
Office	
Select Group Context	
Logout	

Not good

User Information	
Username	jsingh
User	Riding Volunteer
Permission	
Outreach	2016-19FO
Campaign	
Region	Ottawa South
Constit.	
Office	
Select Group Context	
Logout	

Good

Screenshot from a Populus training manual, published online by the Ottawa Centre branch of the federal NDP ([source](#)).

Populus has also been the subject of controversy, including a 2018 investigation by Saskatchewan’s Information and Privacy Commissioner, following a complaint from an individual that a Saskatchewan NDP volunteer had used Populus to **inappropriately access** their personal data. The Commissioner concluded that his office had no jurisdiction to investigate the complaint, and was forced to confine his investigative **report** to outlining voluntary “best practices that parties may adopt when privacy breaches occur.”

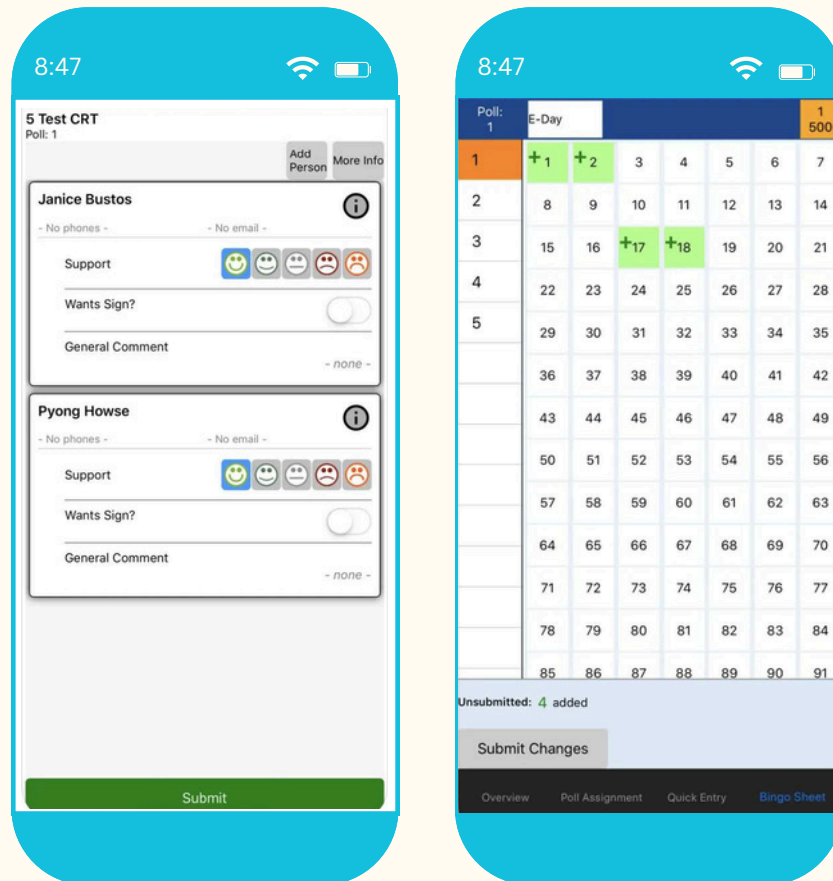
Subsequent **commentary** by Fraser Duncan in the Saskatchewan Law Review noted how the incident “highlights the gap in privacy protection in relation to political parties in most of Canada.”

Analogous VRM tools — also the subject of **privacy debates** — are in use by competing parties, such as the Liberal Party’s **Liberalist**, the Conservative Party’s aforementioned **Constituent Information Management System** (CIMS), and the Bloc Quebecois’ **Democratik**.

As we’ll discuss next, in the modern age of political campaigning, each of these sophisticated VRM systems are accompanied by apps, designed to be used by canvassers and other party officials.

Case Study: CIMS2GO (Canvassing Apps)

Gone are the days when canvassing required the use of rain-sodden paper sheets and advice to volunteers on avoiding carpal tunnel syndrome while carrying clipboards for days on end. First created in 2015, CIMS2GO ([database entry, app store](#)) was designed as the companion app for the Conservative Party's CIMS database, and is now available in both phone and tablet versions.

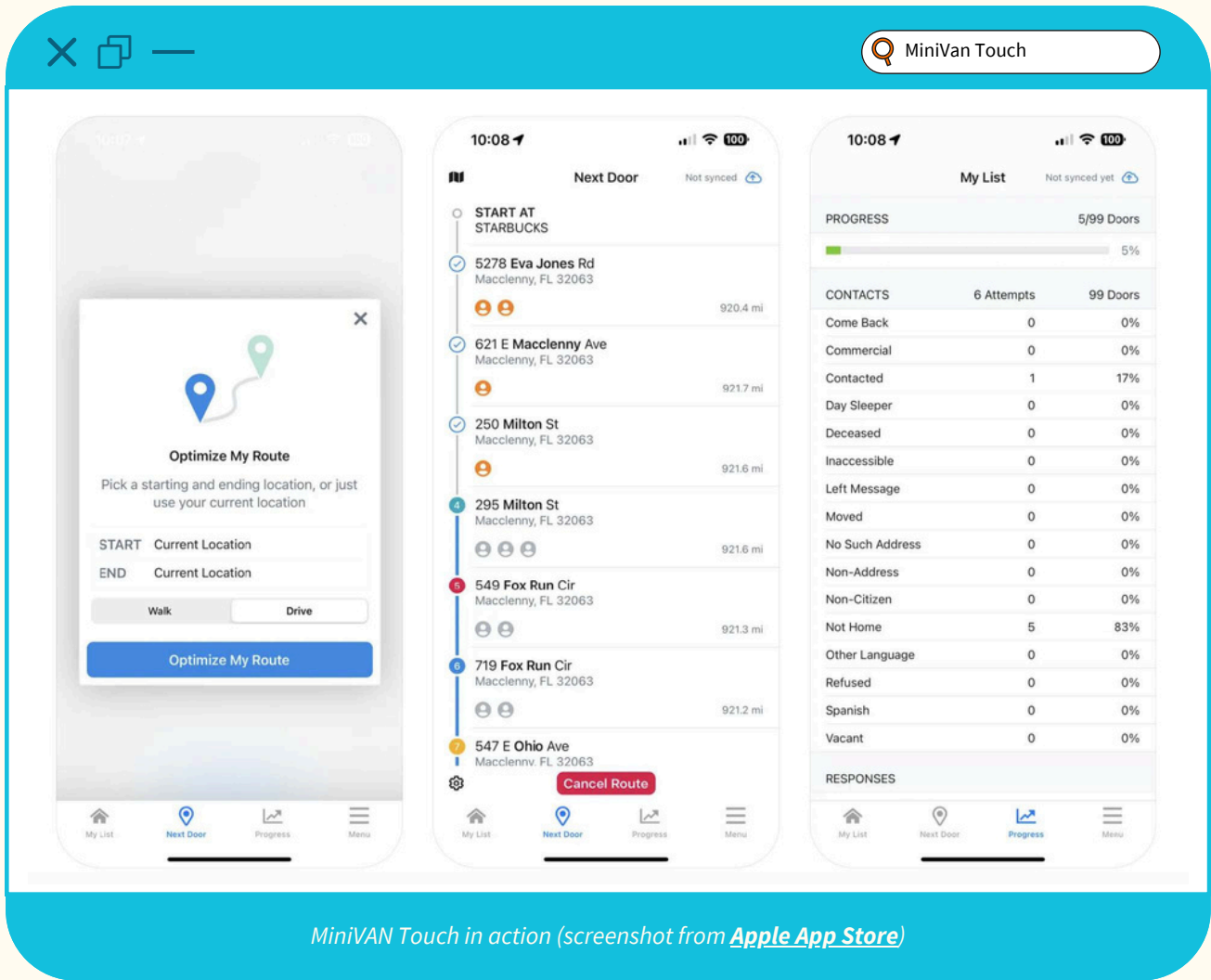


Screenshots from the CIMS2GO app, as [published](#) on the Apple App Store.

As CBC [reported](#) at the time, not only does CIMS2GO allow canvassers to log voters' information directly as they go door-to-door, it also gives senior organizers "the opportunity for more accurate tracking of those canvassers' progress in battleground ridings."

Again, analogous apps are in use by competing parties, such as the NDP’s **Dandelion**, and **MiniVAN Touch**, used by the **federal Liberal Party** as well as many Democratic Party campaigns in the US.

Screenshots from MiniVAN Touch’s App Store page demonstrate how such apps can now optimize a canvasser’s route, and prompt canvassers with a range of potential fields to complete about individual voters — in this US example, such fields include “Day Sleeper”, “Non Citizen”, and “Spanish”:



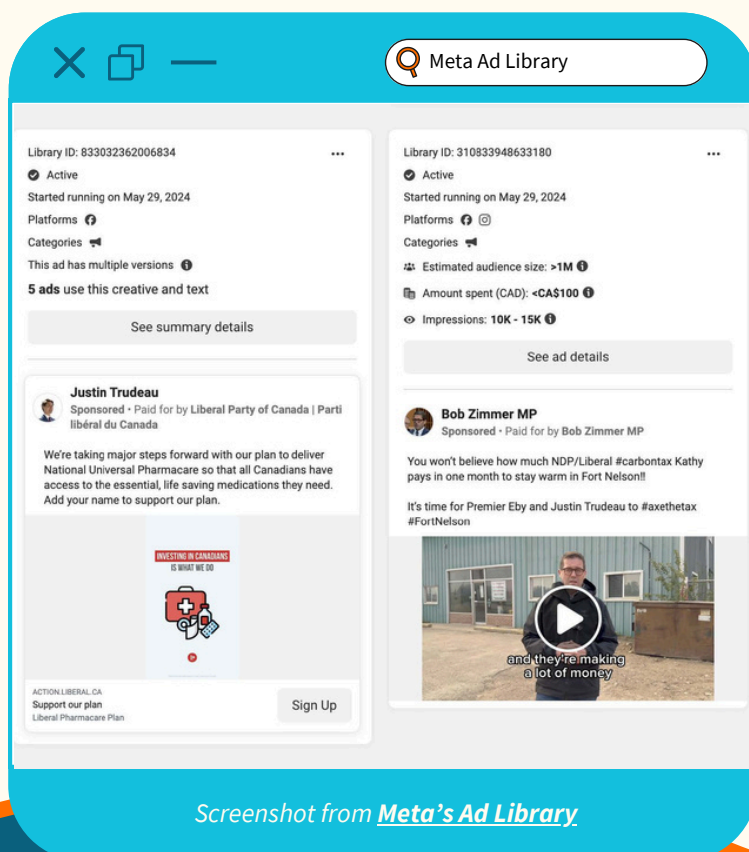
Case Study: Facebook (Advertising Platform)

Facebook ([database entry](#), [website](#)) is a long-established platform for social media advertising in Canada. It is widely used by both political parties and third party organisations seeking to influence voters during, and often between, elections at all levels of Canadian politics.

During the 2019 federal election, for example, researchers [tracked 45,633 ads](#) running across 2,681 active Facebook pages.

In the first week alone of the 2019 election, journalist Stephen Maher [reported](#) that the Liberal Party (including individual candidates) spent as much as **\$148,947**, with their rivals in the Conservative Party spending over **\$88,000** and the NDP spending over **\$34,000** — that’s over a quarter of a million dollars in just seven days.

These numbers suffice to give at least some sense of the sheer scale of the influence wielded by Facebook advertising — and its Meta sister-platform Instagram, increasingly favoured as a way to reach younger demographics — in Canadian electoral politics.

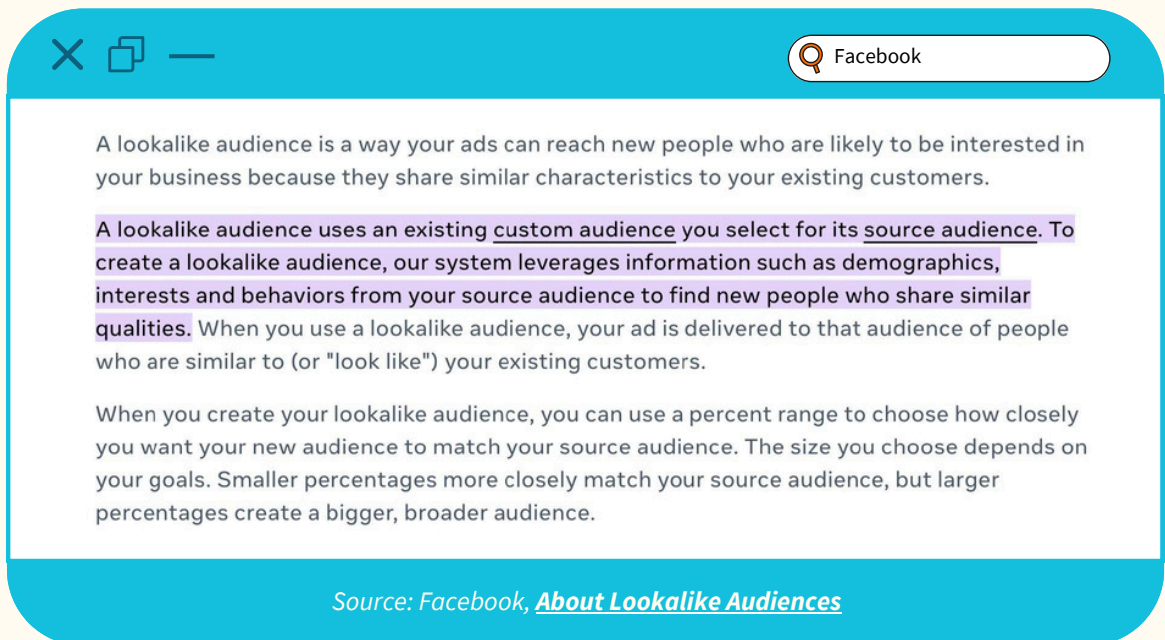


Nor is such advertising restricted to the writ period — at any given moment, Canadians are being bombarded with political ads. At the time of writing, a quick search of Meta’s [Ad Library](#) for the term “Trudeau”, revealed over 540 political ads currently active with that keyword.

Why is Facebook so popular as a political advertising platform? In part, the answer is obvious — for reach alone, Meta reported 23 million Canadian users of Facebook in early 2024. But there are significant other pull factors too, with two of the biggest being:

➔ **Microtargeting:** Facebook’s business model revolves around collecting vast amounts of personal information about its users. In turn, this allows advertisers to very narrowly target their ads to certain demographics — by age, gender, language, geographical location (down to individual postal codes), etc. In their research on the 2019 election, Edelson et al **found** that microtargeting “was used for practically every ad” — a practice they note permits parties to send different messages to different communities, citing an example of Conservative Party messaging that was used exclusively to target Chinese-language voters.

➔ **Lookalike Audiences:** As Facebook **explains**, its lookalike audience feature permits advertisers to upload their own datasets of individuals they wish to reach. This means political parties can export voter data from their own VRM and upload it to Facebook, which then crunches the numbers to target their ads at users with similar demographics:



The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook help page. At the top, there is a search bar with the word "Facebook" and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar, there are three icons: a close button (X), a share button, and a menu button. The main content area contains the following text:

A lookalike audience is a way your ads can reach new people who are likely to be interested in your business because they share similar characteristics to your existing customers.

A lookalike audience uses an existing custom audience you select for its source audience. To create a lookalike audience, our system leverages information such as demographics, interests and behaviors from your source audience to find new people who share similar qualities. When you use a lookalike audience, your ad is delivered to that audience of people who are similar to (or "look like") your existing customers.

When you create your lookalike audience, you can use a percent range to choose how closely you want your new audience to match your source audience. The size you choose depends on your goals. Smaller percentages more closely match your source audience, but larger percentages create a bigger, broader audience.

Source: Facebook, [About Lookalike Audiences](#)

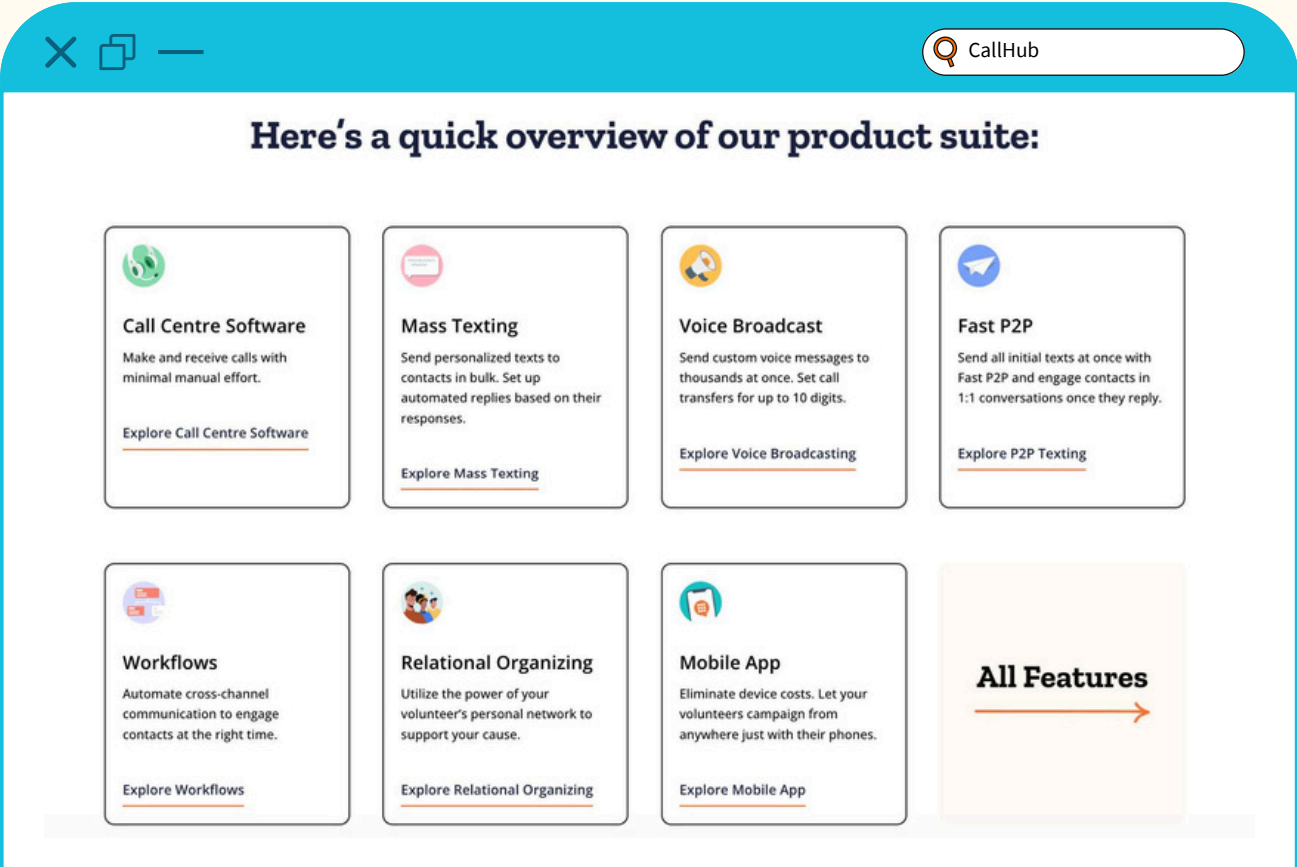
Unsurprisingly, the role Facebook advertising plays within the arena of Canadian electoral politics has been the subject of a great deal of academic analysis. We include a number of excellent resources in our bibliography for readers keen to learn more.

Case Study: CallHub (Voter Contact & Fundraising)

While apps like CIMS2GO, Dandelion, and MiniVAN Touch are used to collect voters' personal information, voter contact tools like CallHub ([database entry](#), [website](#)) are used to translate that data into results — whether in the form of get-out-the-vote mobilization, persuasion of swing voters, or cold hard cash.

Such tools can be used for phone banking, SMS broadcasting, voice broadcasting, or even **peer-to-peer texting**. CallHub is one of the best known of these tools, and is widely used by parties across the political spectrum in both Canada and the US.

Our research found evidence that CallHub is used by parties and candidates at municipal, provincial, and federal level in Canada, including the federal and provincial NDP, the BC Liberal Party, the BC Greens, and Jyoti Gondek's mayoral campaign in Calgary.



The screenshot shows a web interface for CallHub. At the top, there is a search bar containing the text "CallHub". Below the search bar, the heading reads "Here's a quick overview of our product suite:". The main content area is a grid of seven product cards. Each card features an icon, a title, a brief description, and a link to explore the product. The products listed are: Call Centre Software, Mass Texting, Voice Broadcast, Fast P2P, Workflows, Relational Organizing, and Mobile App. A larger card on the right side of the grid is titled "All Features" with an arrow pointing to the right. At the bottom of the screenshot, a blue banner contains the text: "CallHub offers political parties a wide variety of ways to translate datasets into electoral impact (source: [CallHub website](#))".

CallHub offers political parties a wide variety of ways to translate datasets into electoral impact (source: [CallHub website](#))

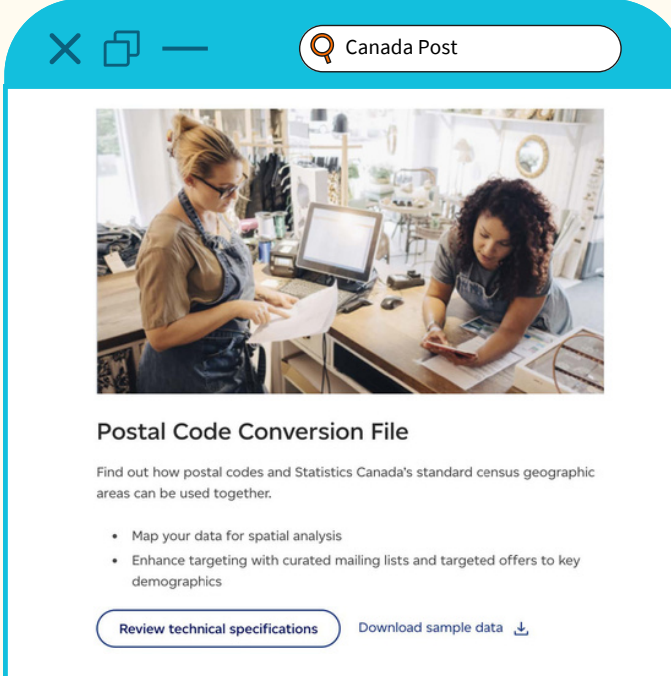
Case Study: Canada Post (Data Source)

Data is at the core of the Political Influence Industry, and parties do their utmost to gather relevant data from as many sources as they can.


While many of these sources are highly sophisticated (think layering your bespoke opinion poll findings onto **neighbourhood-level demographic data**) other sources are remarkably straightforward.

In 2018, for example, representatives from the Liberals, NDP, and Conservatives all testified to a parliamentary committee that they purchase change-of-address data from Canada Post (**database entry, website**) to keep their voter lists up-to-date.

As this **Canada Post presentation** explains, they provide “an electronic version of the address and Postal Code data for every delivery address in Canada. Four supplementary files provide information about alternate municipality names, alternate street names, large volume receivers (LVRs), and accented names. An address change file is also included as a reference file, which shows what an address was in one month, and what it changed to within the data product the following month.”



Canada Post



Postal Code Conversion File

Find out how postal codes and Statistics Canada's standard census geographic areas can be used together.

- Map your data for spatial analysis
- Enhance targeting with curated mailing lists and targeted offers to key demographics

[Review technical specifications](#) [Download sample data](#) ↓

Not just about the mail anymore — Canada Post now offers a range of sophisticated data mapping services ([source](#))

Canada Post also offers several additional **licensed data services**, including Postal Code Address Data, Householder Data, and a **Postal Code Conversion File** that can be used in conjunction with Statistics Canada's standard census geographic areas to map data for spatial analysis, and enable “enhanced targeting with curated mailing lists and targeted offers to key demographics.” We were unable to verify whether such sophisticated tools are currently in use by political parties.

Conclusions: Social, political and legal implications

- ➔ The Canadian Influence industry is large. Beneath the surface of the party-political battle is an extensive network of companies that work in various capacities for political parties and candidates at federal, provincial and municipal levels. The numbers reported here are likely an underestimate, given inconsistencies in the reporting requirements. The companies involved are also highly varied – large and small, local and national.
- ➔ They perform a variety of different roles in the campaign ecosystem. The report reveals that, as campaigns have increasingly become dependent on data, different functions need to be performed to mobilize those data, at the correct time, to the right audiences. We have classified these functions as: data analytics, intelligence and polling; data sources; social media ad platforms; voter contact tools; and voter relationship management systems. Several companies, however, span different roles. The effective modern campaign increasingly requires a seamless integration of data into every aspect of voter contact, engagement, and mobilization.
- ➔ Political parties perform unique and essential roles in Canadian democracy. They educate and mobilize voters. They are the critical mechanisms that link the citizen to his/her government. Whereas in 2000, it was possible to define and distinguish the different kinds of organizations associated with political campaigning, the current network of institutions is complex, opaque, and dynamic, involving close alliances between political data brokers, digital advertising firms, data management and analytical companies, social media platforms, and political parties in the “campaign ecosystem.” This is, to a large extent, a “black box” -- as is much of our digital economy.

- ➔ Political campaigns in Canada, as elsewhere, **are now permanent activities**. And the political influence industry is constantly active. The permanency of campaigning has been a feature of Canadian politics for many years, and means that electioneering occurs between elections, even when no official campaign is underway and no election writ has been issued. The permanent campaign means that every statement, decision, and event is driven by the desire to appeal to specific pockets of voters. The permanent campaign therefore produces an insatiable and continuous desire for data to refine the analytical models to predict voter behavior. This continuous assessment of issues and voters cannot happen without an extensive political influence industry.
- ➔ We found several examples of companies who work exclusively for parties with a shared ideological perspective. Our case studies of Data Sciences Inc. and Responsive Marketing Group are both good examples of this. In some cases, this tendency is reinforced by cross-pollination as staffers move between political parties and the political influence industry. Examples here include the Gandalf Group (founded by former Liberal advisor David Herle), and Politrain Consulting (founded by former Ontario PC staffer Mitch Wexler).
- ➔ Our methodology also exposed the weakness of election finance reporting. Our data are incomplete and inconsistent because of the lack of consistency and transparency. In most jurisdictions, parties simply need to indicate a total dollar amount for spending on broadly-defined categories, rather than spending on specific companies within the Political Influence Industry. A more consistent approach to election spending reporting requirements across jurisdictions — for example, that would bring every province into line with the granular reporting requirements of Saskatchewan and New Brunswick — would enable Canadians to have a much clearer sense of the extent of the Political Influence Industry across the country.

- ➔ Our findings reinforce the problems of the current privacy regulatory landscape. Many of the companies mentioned in this report will not be processing personally identifiable data. But several will, and they presumably do so under contracts with security and privacy provisions. It is in no one's interests in a highly competitive political environment to suffer the considerable reputational embarrassment and harm caused by data breaches. Most of these companies, to the extent that they process personally identifiable data, will be required to comply with *PIPEDA*, which generally requires consent for the collection of personal data, and be accountable to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, and/or its provincial equivalents.
- ➔ At the same time the recent amendments to the Canada Elections Act make it clear that the published privacy policies of the FPPs apply to “any person or organization acting on the party’s behalf.” These requirements say nothing about the capture of data with an individual’s consent (express or otherwise). There is a clear operational conflict between the *CEA*, and the standards within *PIPEDA* and other provincial privacy laws.
- ➔ This conflict and confusion is not just hypothetical. In 2019, the OPC, and the BC OIPC, investigated the practices of the Victoria based company Aggregate IQ Data Services Ltd which drew international scrutiny as a result of its role providing software development, database management, and digital advertising services to campaigns in the US, the UK (Brexit), and Canada. The Commissioners **conducted a joint investigation** and found that Aggregate IQ had not complied with Canadian privacy law, as it was obliged to do even when it was working for clients outside Canada. The company had “failed to ensure adequate consent for its collection, use, or disclosure of personal information in accordance with applicable *PIPA* or *PIPEDA* requirements.”

- ➔ These findings reveal the total inadequacy of the self-regulatory approach to FPPs in the *CEA*. Nothing in the *CEA*'s provisions oblige the political parties to obtain consent when they collect personal data on Canadians. And yet, companies that work for them and which are governed by the consent requirements in federal and provincial privacy laws, must (according to the decision on Aggregate IQ) ensure that they: **“take reasonable measures to ensure that the consent on which it relies – as the basis for its collection, use and disclosure of personal information on behalf of its clients – is compliant with PIPA and PIPEDA, as appropriate.”**
- ➔ Therefore, contrary to the claims that the *CEA* amendments will provide for a “national, uniform, exclusive and complete” privacy regime for FPPs and the organizations that work for them, it actually does nothing of the sort. This section does not provide for uniformity. Our findings indicate that it will do the opposite, and create considerable confusion for the companies identified in this report, that process personally identifiable data for political parties, and at the same time have to comply with federal and/or provincial privacy laws, as interpreted by the federal and provincial information and privacy commissioners.
- ➔ The Canadian influence industry will, we predict, get larger and more influential as new modeling and analytical techniques, **fuelled in part by Artificial Intelligence (AI)** enters Canadian political campaigns. It will also get increasingly complex, networked, and opaque. It constitutes a “black box” in desperate need of further transparency so that Canadians can properly understand the industry’s role in our political system.
- ➔ This research has demonstrated the pressing need for a truly national regime governing the practices of federal political parties that provides truly enforceable privacy rights for Canadians, and an effective system of accountability and oversight. This consistency and clarity is not only necessary for Canadian citizens, but also, we propose, for the many organizations that work for them discussed in this report. These companies are obliged to comply with those privacy laws, which our political parties have so far refused to apply to themselves.

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