

Online Party of Canada seeks to reshape political process

Brett Howie — The McGill Daily (McGill University)

MONTREAL (CUP) — The Online Party of Canada, billing itself as “Canada’s Political Revolution,” intends to make the Internet not only an instrument of Canadians’ political will, but also the foundation of the Canadian political process.

“The impetus for the project is to return Canadian politics to their original democratic roots, a simpler system of pure democracy, people voting not for specific politicians or parties, but rather voting on issues,” said Stephanie Penney, a senior adviser for the OPC.

“The party got started about a year ago, but really revved up in the last few months,” she added, attributing the new momentum to the recent launch of the party’s website.

Through its unique methodology, the OPC hopes to address what it sees as the major flaw in our current political process: Voter apathy produced by a widespread feeling that personal concerns are ignored at the level of parliamentary power, and that elected officials lack accountability to their voters.

While Penney acknowledged that the notion of combating voter apathy is far from new, she affirmed that the OPC’s approach is “the best way to encourage people to go out and inform themselves and to get people invested again in the political process.”

OPC will field candidates in federal ridings, and, if elected, MPs would be legally obligated to carry out the majority position established by online votes. Membership is available to any eligible voter, and grants access to online forums organized in terms of issues, and a right to vote on those issues.

The emphasis on issues is designed to avoid what the OPC sees as an inevitable pitfall of the party system.

“It’s not the case that somebody would be all Conservative for all issues or all Liberal, it’s always a blend ... so this approach can really embrace that heterogeneity in people’s opinions,” asserted Penney.

Given that the Internet is increasingly the primary source of information for Canadians, Penney denies the possibility that the convenience of an online forum will enable the participation of uninformed and disengaged individuals in critical decision-making processes.

“With any system, Internet-based or not, you’re going to have a sector of the people who are eligible to vote who are voting without sufficient information. OPC is the best shot we’ve got ... of basically encouraging people to inform themselves more in a way that’s convenient for them,” said Penney.

In an email, McGill University political science professor Dietlind Stolle drew parallels between the OPC and other parties worldwide that are “focused on using the Internet for political activities” and “like to appeal to young people and to the disaffection in politics that we observe in western democracies.”

Stolle questions the yet unclear role of leadership in the party, as well as the practicality of the decision-making progress in certain contexts.

“Will there be a party leadership that defines what’s on the agenda and how issues are put on the agenda? If so, they need tools to discuss and weigh issues. Will all this be done online?” she asked.

She also raised concerns about the OPC’s reliance on what she called “referendum tools” — the population voting on a yes-no basis.

“First of all, not all questions lend themselves to a referendum with two choices. Second, it’s a majoritarian tool, and might, at times at least, suppress minority voices,” Stolle said.

However Michael Nicula, founder of the OPC, stressed the party’s revolutionary agenda.

“We are not trying to fit into the current political system, we believe it’s archaic and flawed,” wrote Michael Nicula in an email. “OPC is designed to be the new political system.”

These statements, however, highlight a fundamental problem for a party whose core principles involve a rejection of the system with which it must necessarily engage, and Penney admits as much.

“It’s going to be increasingly challenging as time moves on because we need to successfully interact with the existing system in order to move forward ... but yet interacting with the system, it will be challenging to mesh that with the OPC principles.”

-30-