

# The New Democratic Party

*Rory Henry*

As the poll results came in on the evening of the 2019 provincial election, the media and pundits seemed surprised by the fact that the New Democratic Party (NDP) seemed happier and more energized by the results than the victors—despite having half the seats of the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party. This was no fake enthusiasm for the cameras, but it reflected the immense challenges the party had overcome in the campaign, and their immediate awareness of the potential future that the evening's results revealed.

Like all parties, the NDP's campaign focused on achieving success on E-Day, but the E-Day they had in mind was the one four years in the future. The party faced numerous challenges. The previous all-party consensus on the importance of fixed-date elections for fair campaigns was unilaterally dismissed by the premier, throwing all campaigns a major curveball in their preparations. The chosen date placed the campaign in the summer months, with the critical last week in the very busy beginning of September. The new date caused a major decline in public interest and attention in the election (which usually favours incumbent governments) and in the availability of volunteers. Per-vote political party funding, introduced to reduce the influence of money in democratic campaigns, was eliminated. Further, the election

rebate that had been in place for decades was reduced by half, and immediately after the election Premier Pallister announced he would be moving to eliminate it entirely. Both these changes gave a very significant financial advantage to the governing Conservatives that translated into a massive advantage in terms of paid advertising and research and polling opportunities. The PC Party also had the option to pay for positions from managers down to door knockers, while the other parties had to scramble to find volunteers. The early timing of the election gave the governing party an additional advantage in that it was called in close conjunction to a health care sector bargaining vote that the government triggered. The health care vote preoccupied and exhausted many of the volunteers that an NDP campaign seeks to attract. In the lead-up to the election, volunteers that the NDP depend upon for organizational positions had been snapped up by unions needing their campaigning abilities for the bargaining vote.

Not all of the NDP's challenges were caused by the actions of the incumbent government changing the rules to their advantage. The lingering impacts of the Selinger period remained a concern, both in terms of internal party cooperation and in terms of the public backlash that had emerged in reaction to the Selinger government. Running in his first

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campaign as leader, Wab Kinew came with particular challenges. Kinew's public early history of run-ins with the law and allegations of domestic violence featured prominently in PC attack advertisements in the election and the pre-election period. Further, Kinew faced the challenge of navigating Manitoba politics as an Indigenous person. Those that were inclined to vote for him were nevertheless concerned that he might be *too Indigenous* and allow Indigenous concerns to take too much of his focus as a leader. PC advertising made sure to feature him in pictures with Greg Selinger and in clothing that highlighted his Indigenous identity. Ironically, at the same time a whisper campaign from those not inclined to support him argued that he was not Indigenous *enough*, and that the mistakes and challenges of his past should not be seen in the context of the damage that settler colonialism has inflicted on Indigenous peoples.

For the NDP, safe seats lost in the 2016 electoral debacle needed to be retaken, and seats that had been held on to by a thread could not be taken for granted, especially in the face of attempts by the Liberals and the Greens to reinvent themselves as the progressive option in the province. Like other parties, the NDP faced the challenges of redistribution, but on top of that they were running with only half of their incumbents from the 2016 campaign. Furthermore, the NDP's funding for polling and research was less than half of what a modern campaign in Manitoba requires. The party was not able to fully

identify its vote and potential target seats as the campaign developed, nor would they likely have had any resources or volunteers to shift around had they been able to identify these seats. The PC Party's advertisements and mailers dwarfed that of the other parties. When the financial reports from the campaigns become available, we will likely see the largest difference in paid advertising among parties in the modern era of Manitoba politics.

These challenges dictated the nature of the shoestring NDP campaign. A strong focus on health care in the election allowed the NDP to match its biggest public strength against the PC party's biggest weakness. Moreover, a health care focus helped solidify the NDP vote in formerly safe seats (some of which were more directly impacted by emergency room closures), while allowing for potential growth in target seats that faced the indirect impacts of the health care changes. With few resources and little of the inter-constituency cooperation that the NDP historically relied upon, local campaigns were far more self-reliant. Central support for door-to-door engagement, still the best determinant of getting a voter to mark a ballot, was non-existent.

In the face of all these challenges the NDP's joy on the evening of the election seems far more understandable. With one exception, the NDP held its existing seat count and picked up four more from its 2016 tally.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the results showed that there is potential for future growth and a realistic path back to victory in the next election. The party is now in

a position to ensure that its existing seats are firmly in its camp before the next writ. The expanded and re-energized new NDP caucus will be able to compete with the governing caucus at attending public events in the coming years, further raising the party's profile as a government in waiting. The Green and Liberal push to cut into the NDP's vote failed, and early analysis of the results indicate that the NDP voting universe has returned to a size that will make them fully competitive once again.

In order to realise the potential that the 2019 election unlocks, the NDP will nevertheless have to follow a very difficult path. The party will have to find a solution to the new election financing model that is significantly advantageous to one party. The NDP

volunteer base must be expanded for the party to compete in enough seats to form government. Kinew will need to make sure his caucus works hard to hold its existing seats, and find the discipline and focus to reach out to voters that supported the last NDP government. These are not easy challenges, especially for a relatively new leader. Kinew will also need to continue his conversations with Manitobans about his past—negative advertising often suppresses voting, and it is not yet clear if future vote potential might still be limited by concerns over his past. Kinew will have to do all of this with the additional challenge of helping Manitobans come to terms with the possibility that their next premier may be an Indigenous one.

- 1 If counting from when the 2019 election was called, the NDP picked up six seats. This is due to the loss of two NDP seats between 2016 and 2019.