

Sunshine, lollipops and virtual campaigns



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By Nate Smelle

Since the recent announcement from Hastings-Lennox and Addington's former MP Mike Bossio that he would be running in the next federal election, I have been thinking about how different the campaign trail will look this time around due to the pandemic. With experts predicting that the writ will drop sometime in June or September, it is fair to assume that our federal candidates will be campaigning online more than ever.

Having traveled this same path as both a journalist and a political candidate, I can see the advantages to a predominantly virtual campaign in Hastings-Lennox and Addington. First, many of the challenges posed by the massive size of our riding would for the most part be eliminated. Without the expectation to physically appear in as many communities as possible during the campaign, candidates can use the extra time on their hands because of the pandemic to engage with constituents, including members of the media in innovative ways. In addition, by reducing the amount of travel time, and thus the amount of fossil fuels consumed, campaigning online would also help to shrink the size of the election's ecological footprint.

Don't get me wrong, a virtual campaign is not all sunshine and lollipops. There is a downside as well. For instance, the opportunity for candidates to connect personally with potential voters will be significantly diminished. For candidates hoping to poach voters that typically vote for rival political parties, the absence of the "baby kissing factor" will in some ways limit their potential for growth. In this way, a virtual campaign could play out in favour of incumbents relying on the support of the thoughtless faction of voters composing their base, who always vote the way their grandfather did.

But ... a virtual campaign also brings with it a wild card. This wild card is of course the unharnessed potential of social media. As we have seen time and time again - courtesy of conspiracy theorists from the anti-mask community to the latest former U.S. president - social networks on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., foster an almost infinite potential to spread information, whether it is true or false.

Imagine, if by chance these networks were used to inform the public of each party's policies, and our local candidate's position regarding these policies, how an informed vote might change the political landscape in Hastings-Lennox and Addington.

The biggest advantage for voters - the people - arising from a virtual political campaign that I can see are the opportunities such an endeavour would create to educate the public regarding and where exactly they stand as human beings in relation to the issues that

matter. Replacing the traditional "whistle-stop" appearance by political candidates with an opportunity for online engagement might for some seem to be a downgrade. However, what this crowd of naysayers is overlooking is the fact that every single online engagement is also an archivable moment of truth. In turn, each one of these archives can be accessed and assessed prior to voting, to help us as individuals decide what issues matter most to us.

Yes, sometimes candidates who are good people say or do the wrong thing. But, by enriching the opportunity for voters to research candidates, parties and/or the leaders they might choose to support, we better enable the democratic process we have invented to serve our best interests.

The time for voting in line with our family's historical tendencies has long past. In light of the knowledge the internet delivers us with, it has become our responsibility to make ourselves aware of whether we are voting for a decent human being, or a racist fascist. In the months leading up to our next election we need to pay attention to those who intend to represent us. Before we offer our support to these individuals we need to know exactly what it is that they stand for. The stakes are simply too high to cast an uneducated vote.