

Review of the 2022 Ontario Liberal Party Campaign

Campaign Debrief Committee:

Qasir Dar, Campaign Debrief Chair

Patricia Favre, Campaign Debrief Vice-Chair

David Zimmer, Campaign Debrief Vice-Chair

January 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction 3
Context..... 5
Observations..... 7
Next Steps 11
Conclusion 13

Introduction

Background

Following the 2022 General Election, the Ontario Liberal Party (OLP) President and the Ontario Liberal Party Executive Council formed our Campaign Debrief Committee to conduct a review of the 2022 election. This committee was set up as an arm's length working group – independent of the Executive Council and the Party office.

The purpose of this process was to engage with Liberals from across the province and listen to feedback and analyze what happened, why it happened, and what lessons were learned. Ultimately, the Committee sought the recommendations of Ontario Liberals that would form the basis of an action plan to better prepare the Ontario Liberal Party, its future Leader, and members across the province for the 2026 Ontario general election.

Why it matters

- The membership of the OLP – grassroots Ontarians – is the backbone of our Party and as we seek to rebuild, **the input of these key stakeholders** is paramount to our strategy going forward.
- As with every campaign, it's important to **identify what went well and what didn't** so that we can apply learnings to the next campaign.
- As Liberals and as Ontarians, we are facing a **changing landscape** in terms of civic engagement and communication in today's world. As a result, how we run campaigns must change.
- Without a full review of the context of an election campaign, we can't fully realize and understand **how we move forward as a Party and as a community of people who share a progressive ideology** in a rapidly evolving world.

The debrief process

The OLP Executive Council asked us as a committee to listen to the OLP membership and stakeholders to ensure that as we endeavor to rebuild, everyone is heard. There were four main themes the Debrief Committee focused on: the Leader, the Campaign Platform, the Campaign Team; and the Campaign Strategy.

As we embarked on this debrief, our committee focused on five different streams of input, which are outlined below.

In each stream, we took the opportunity to ask key questions to all participants: what was their experience with the 2022 election, what went well, what could have been improved and what are their recommendations moving forward?

Thank you to the thousands of Ontario Liberals who participated in this process. Their feedback is the basis of this report, and it would not have been possible without them.

In-depth Interviews: Our committee met with members, staff, volunteers, candidates, and other stakeholders that were heavily engaged in the 2022 campaign. This includes in-depth interviews with:

- The Ontario Liberal Party Executive Council
- The Ontario Liberal Party President and Campaign Co-Chair
- The Ontario Liberal Party Regional Vice-Presidents
- The Ontario Liberal Party Treasurer
- The Ontario Liberal Party Legal Counsel
- The Ontario Liberal Party 2022 Campaign Director
- Former Leader of the Ontario Liberal Party
- Former Chief of Staff to the Former Leader of the Ontario Liberal Party
- The Ontario Liberal Caucus
- The Ontario Liberal Candidate Debrief Team
- The Campaign's Digital Strategy Vendor
- The Campaign's Public Opinion Research Vendor
- The Campaign's Candidate Nominations Commissioner
- The Ontario Liberal Women's Commission
- The Ontario Young Liberals
- The Campaign Platform Chair
- Ontario Liberal Party Staff

Quantitative Data Collection: Our committee commissioned a neutral, third-party research firm – Public Square Research – to draft a membership survey focused on the 2022 election campaign. We were pleased to have the participation of **more than 1,700 members** who provided valuable feedback. The questionnaire surveyed the following groups:

- General Membership
- Candidates
- Campaign managers
- Riding association presidents
- Campaign CFOs

Emails were sent across the OLP membership asking for participation in this survey.

September 10 Debrief Meeting: Our committee attended the OLP in-person debrief meeting on September 10, 2022, in Toronto. The attendees of this meeting were the general OLP membership that had been invited to participate via email. We took notes during the main plenary sessions and dropped into every regional debrief session. In addition, we had volunteer note-takers in every regional debrief session to ensure feedback and recommendations were captured for our review.

Regional Debrief Meetings: We worked with OLP Regional Vice-Presidents to offer two debrief meetings in every region of the province. In-person and virtual meetings were held with members from Kingston, Ottawa, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Hamilton, St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, Kitchener-Waterloo, Milton, Whitby, Oshawa, Pickering, and London. The attendees had been invited by regional vice presidents based on geographic location.

Online Feedback: The OLP provided an online feedback form to Ontarians through the OLP website. This was an open forum that allowed anyone who wanted to participate to provide open feedback to the OLP regarding any issue they deemed important. This web form was active until December 24, 2022.

Context

The 2022 election campaign must be reviewed in the context of the environment the Party was facing – both the internal and external environments. Below we have laid out the key elements we took into consideration – and heard from others – while conducting our debrief process.

2018 election

The election results of 2018 set the stage for the election of 2022. In 2018, the OLP went from a majority government to losing official party status. The Party went into the election with 78 seats and came out of the election with 7. With this loss, the OLP also lost a lot of resources that generally come with official party status.

As the OLP started to rebuild from this defeat, the Party entered a leadership race through a delegated system that attempted to engage ridings across the province. With a little over two years before the next scheduled election, the OLP celebrated the win of Steven Del Duca as their new leader.

The 2022 election took place in the backdrop of a global pandemic. The leader was elected only 10 days before the province shut down, enforcing mandates to stay at home and cease all public gatherings. This changed the dynamics of the organization.

Party resources

With only eight seats in the legislature – the Party had minimal staff in both the Party Office and the Leader’s Office. As a result, the Party had very little staff to form what had previously been referred to as the “Ontario Liberal Machine”. We lacked the critical infrastructure our Party had become accustomed to before the 2018 election.

The COVID-19 pandemic

Although the Leader of the Party had a full year to campaign for leadership, he only had exactly 10 days from the day he became the Leader at the 2020 OLP convention until the Government of Ontario declared a state of emergency and took our province into a lockdown to safeguard against the pandemic. This meant the hustle and bustle of a traditional campaign was no longer a reality and the team had to work around this overwhelming limitation.

Even though the leader and the OLP campaign team had two years to strategize outside the box in terms of communication and getting the Liberal message to Ontarians, it proved to be a major challenge as Ontarians were focused on the pandemic and how it impacted their lives.

This had wide-ranging, unprecedented effects on the OLP team, the lead-up to the campaign and of course, the campaign itself.

- The **traditional ways of community engagement were no longer available**. Ahead of the campaign, there were no in-door rallies, or annual general meetings of riding associations.
- The **Leader was not able to benefit from a traditional tour** ahead of the election.
- **Voter intentions had significantly shifted due to the pandemic**. From March 2020 until election day, the main focus of voters had been the pandemic. Between mask mandates, businesses shutting down, and people having limited access to health facilities, the pandemic had been overwhelming.

Financial resources

One of the successes of the OLP in the lead up to the 2022 election was its ability, as a third party, to **clear the previous debt of \$10 million**.

We were told this took tenacity and significant grassroots involvement. Many felt incredibly hopeful, rightly so, about **being two years out from the election entirely debt-free**. We have been told this was a first in recent OLP history. That is a significant testament to the Party's former Leader and the Ontario Liberal Party.

However, the 2022 campaign **spending power of our competition** was significant.

- The Ontario NDP spent \$13 million.
- The Ontario PC Party spent \$11.5 million
- The Ontario Liberal Party spent \$9.6 million.

The OLP's treasurer estimates a successful election campaign in Ontario in 2026 will cost a political party roughly \$13 to \$15 million.

The changing landscape

The world is changing. Voters have faced a pandemic, a different way of consuming information in the digital age, a shifting dynamic of geopolitics at the international level, and a significant change in the expectations of their governments.

- At the time of the 2022 election, **voter apathy was at an all-time high**. Civic duty is no longer enough to get people to the polls. Partisan politics isn't what it used to be.
- **More and more Ontarians are becoming issue-based voters**. Simplistic solutions to real problems are gaining traction and that has been demonstrated in the waves of populist movements we have seen around the globe. This was depicted in the lowest voter turnout in the recent history of Ontario.
- **The way Ontarians get their information has changed**. The days of a top-down news approach are less relevant. People are more digitally connected than ever. Political campaigns have to be delivered digitally more and more.
- The elections Ontario Liberals won in 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2014 were fought in trenches that barely exist anymore. **Traditional campaigns were no longer available or desirable to voters, in part due to the pandemic**.

Observations

During this debrief, we heard from Ontario Liberals from every part of the province. This included Young Liberals in their first campaign and more experienced Liberals who were veterans of many campaigns. Despite their many differences, several key themes emerged.

This section of the report outlines **the things we heard** after countless hours of conversations, written communications, and data analysis.

The Leader

Through our membership survey, we learned that a strong majority of participants felt our Leader was unpopular and that the OLP campaign failed to address this issue. As the candidate debrief team so eloquently wrote in their report – “we could not turn our leader’s strengths into electoral assets.”

During our debrief sessions, we heard the following:

- Ontario Liberals recognized the hardworking nature of the Leader and his ability to organize, but many were also critical of the Leader’s ability to showcase his brand and his position on policy issues that were top-of-mind for Ontarians.
- The majority of our survey participants felt the leadership process was not reflective of the views of the majority of Ontarians. In our debriefs, we heard from Liberals that the Leader was unknown because the current process of the leadership race was too complicated.
- Participants recognized the Leader had many successes – particularly the efforts to eliminate the Party debt. However, they did not feel the Party was able to translate those efforts into messages that influenced the results of the election.
- We heard the Leader was often insulated from the ground realities of the election campaign, including in his own riding. This provided barriers to his effective participation in crafting and delivering messaging.

The Platform

The starting point of our platform is to define who we are as Ontario Liberals.

Over the course of the review, we heard “what it means to be a Liberal” was not well defined or communicated. Many members and candidates felt we were **trying to be too much of everything – and through that, we lost our way.**

We heard from candidates that people did not know what OLP stood for.

When asked in our membership survey what it means to be an Ontario Liberal, members used words such as: **centrist, progressive, right-minded, community, health, balanced and socially responsible.** This varied response was reflected in the platform.

There was much debate about the OLP platform and whether it contained something for everyone. Overall, this topic was inconsistent and held many varied opinions.

- Many respondents felt the platform missed key issues, was not well-timed and was not well developed.
- Many felt that what the platform lacked was a key and consistent message: a vision of what the province under the Ontario Liberal brand should look like.
- Others said that while the platform tried to include something for everyone, ultimately, it became too complicated for candidates to communicate and the Liberal message of “why” was lost among the promises made in the document.
- The majority of participants we heard from in rural areas felt the platform completely disregarded non-GTA ridings.
- Many candidates expressed that while the platform was full of rich ideas, it was too difficult to communicate at the doors and with local media. They did not know which three-to-five main policy proposals were the most important to the Party and the province.
- The majority of stakeholders felt the “take the mic” approach to developing the policy and platform was important for engaging the base of the Party. This was a successful tactic that allowed participants to feel heard and their ideas to be included.
- The lack of a policy convention was noted amongst participants. It was felt that the lack of a policy convention meant the ideas from the “take the mic” approach were not translated into a cohesive and practical platform.

The Ontario Liberal Team

The OLP team is much more than the Leader and Campaign Team. The OLP team also includes candidates, PLAs, and volunteers. These dedicated individuals formulate the infrastructure of the Party.

Provincial Liberal Associations: While there are 124 PLAs across the province, many of these organizations felt ignored during the election.

- They did not feel the Party supported their grassroots efforts in the two years leading up to the election. They often felt their opinions were discounted.
- Many felt that a lack of training with respect to voter engagement, data management, volunteer recruitment and fundraising left them at a disadvantage and unable to support local candidates.
- Many PLAs felt the Party did not have a strategy to support ridings that had a history of electoral success.
- At the same time, many candidates felt PLAs were obstructive, non-supportive or inactive for the campaign.

Candidates: The majority of Ontario Liberals felt that our candidate roster was the greatest strength of the Party and the campaign.

- The dedication to gender parity and the “30 under 30” campaign was very well received.
- There was overwhelming support and pride in the Party’s achievement of gender parity amongst candidates, though it was acknowledged that more work still needs to be done to address the unique challenges that women, non-binary, and racialized candidates face.
- Some felt the Party needs to spend more time vetting candidates to ensure that not only do our candidates’ views align with Party values, but also that their “ground game” in their respective ridings is effective.
- Many voiced the desire for more transparency in the recruitment and nomination process.
- A large number of participants in this process felt candidates did not receive the training they needed to run effective campaigns. This includes stakeholder engagement, volunteer recruitment, data management, and fundraising development.
- Some participants also felt candidates needed better media training and a briefing on the campaign platform and the priorities of the Party.
- Candidates felt like they were recruited to run a ‘front-runners’ campaign, but for many of them, this was their first campaign, and they **did not have clear expectations** of what running a campaign would be like or what was expected of them.
- Local volunteers felt if we had consistent PLAs across the province, training could be a way to better engage them.

Volunteers: 82 per cent of local campaign executives said volunteer recruitment was the biggest challenge faced in their riding.

- We heard consistently that more work should have been done to identify and train local campaign managers, as well as other critical campaign roles. Historically, many of these roles were filled by political staff – this is clearly no longer an option.
- In some ridings, canvassing presented itself as a serious challenge. Not only was it difficult to recruit canvassers, but inexperienced canvassers led to inconsistent and sometimes inaccurate data. Volunteers and local teams felt more support should have been provided to address this challenge.

The Central Campaign Team: At an unprecedented time, and with very little staff available, we were told the decision was made to model the central campaign team on a structure similar to past campaigns, but with some unpaid volunteers filling in key roles. Some challenges associated with this approach were identified by those working on and with the central campaign team:

- We were told that some of the team had full-time jobs, which led to communication issues as all were not able to be present all the time and needed to concurrently focus on their employment.

- We heard It was difficult to fully integrate some of the teams and functions due to the hybrid nature of the campaign.
- It was brought to our attention that given the uncertainty of the pandemic and the financial impact, many feared it would have on the Party, the decision was made to keep the Leader's Office staff very lean. It was voiced in hindsight that a bigger team would have better supported the campaign.
- We also heard there were significant ideological differences between traditional campaign tactics that had been used in the past and proposed innovations that took into account the context of today's political climate. These differences generally involved the frame of reference from past campaigners and the professional experience and proposed modernization from new campaigners. These issues were largely unresolved.
- We heard some staff and local campaigns felt the overlapping and unclear structure of decision making throughout the campaign limited its functionality, not just in the center, but also on the ground across Ontario. Participants detailed delays in decision making as well as confusion about roles and responsibilities within the campaign team.

Party Infrastructure

As a Party that was often identified by stakeholders and media as 'the big red tent', it is hard for many to believe our Party infrastructure sits where it does today. While many spoke of the impressive work that was done by a small team after the 2018 loss, it seems our **members and candidates were not fully pre-conditioned about the realities of our infrastructure.**

Membership didn't feel engaged: Through our survey, members expressed a desire for greater engagement. A vast majority of members said they would like to be more engaged between elections.

Training and support: As referenced several times above, a common theme was the feeling the Party did not provide sufficient training opportunities for candidates or volunteers.

Data: The topic of data came up in several in-depth interviews and debrief meetings. The overwhelming question being – **why didn't we see this coming?**

The following observations and opinions were shared with the campaign debrief team:

- A strong feeling that the Party doesn't have the right voter data. Many felt voter intentions were misidentified and that we lacked key voter information such as cell phone numbers.
- The belief that **polling is an art, not a science.** And with the way the world is changing, we can no longer rely on polling alone to determine any outcome.

Next Steps

With the **objective of strengthening Party infrastructure and positioning OLP as best as possible in the lead-up to the 2026 general election**, the Campaign Debrief Team is making the following recommendations to OLP's Executive Council.

Recommendations

- 1. Rebuild PLAs and hire field staff** – It is clear the health of our PLAs has suffered from a lack of well-defined roles and responsibilities and the support of experienced field staff. We recommend a minimum of three field organizers be hired as soon as possible. They should be given the mandate of rebuilding PLAs so we have a healthy base of trained local volunteers. Part of this rebuilding mandate should include developing guidelines for PLAs about their roles and responsibilities in preparation for the nomination of a candidate, building a local campaign team, and preparation for a general election.
- 2. Launch a consultation on the leadership process** – It was evident through our discussions that members felt the Party needs to do more work on modernizing the Party and engaging its members. Liberals across the province, including 66 per cent of our survey respondents, told us the leadership race needs to be restructured and more inclusive. We recommend the Executive Council launch a review of its leadership election process to determine whether we have the right processes in place to engage our membership on this very critical decision.
- 3. Find ways to keep previous candidates involved** – Of the candidates that participated in our membership survey – 78 per cent said they would consider running as an OLP candidate again. We recommend harnessing this energy by asking past candidates interested in staying engaged with the OLP to take on leadership positions in their riding associations, with the caveat that their engagement does not automatically qualify them to become candidates again in the next election.
- 4. Adjust to a hybrid world** – Most employers have embraced the reality that we now live in a hybrid world and that some meetings and events may never be fully in-person again. OLP's Executive Council should consider permanently providing a virtual option for any Liberal that wants to engage in local OLP activities, such as PLA AGMs and nomination meetings.
- 5. Prioritize obtaining and correcting voter data** – This last provincial campaign highlighted the limitations we face without this data, particularly cell phone numbers. Strong data impacts the ability to connect and resonate with Ontarians. It helps to develop strategy and strengthen campaigns. One way to collect data is to have monthly 'Days of Actions', which will not only drive grassroots engagement but also build a solid data base in each riding across Ontario. The OLP should take a deep dive into data management and understand how to better communicate with Ontarians while also maintaining their privacy.
- 6. Woman-only designation** – We recommend OLP institutionalize the woman-only designation and grow it to include other equity-seeking groups. We recommend that the

Party create a clearly communicated strategy around targeted ridings that should be woman-only or equity-seeking. These ridings should be identified well in advance so that PLAs have clear direction on what they are looking for when asked to start doing research to identify possible local candidates.

7. Campaign director – Given the challenges described about the campaign team, and the challenges of maintaining a steady stream of resources, we recommend the Party hire full-time campaign director at least one year in advance of the election. This individual should be fully integrated into the OLP team.

8. Key campaign staff – Once elected, the new Leader should strive to fill their office with key roles immediately – such as a Director of Communications, Issues Manager, Policy Adviser and Director of Tour. These roles should be ones that can transition to the campaign team.

9. Provide continuous training opportunities – Create a training plan that allows for continuous training for key positions in central and local campaigns to prepare volunteers for their roles. The plan should consider how we can make that training available to already active volunteers, as well as recruit new volunteers.

10. Lean on the expertise of caucus – Create a mentorship program where the Party pairs every new candidate with a member of caucus. This should help new candidates understand their roles and responsibilities while having a mentor guide the way.

11. Harness the energy around “Ask her to run’ and ‘30 under 30’ and direct it toward campaign managers as well. It is well acknowledged that the Party made amazing efforts in securing a strong candidate team. We recommend creating a plan as to how this could be extended to campaign managers as well.

12. Modernize our approach to running campaigns – We heard from both central and local campaigns that ‘the old way of campaigning’ doesn’t work. We must be realistic and focus on achieving Party status so we can build from there. This will involve a modernized campaign plan that leans into the realities of today’s changing traditional and digital media landscape.

13. Keep the platform process but include a policy convention – It is clear the ‘take the mic’ process was one that was embraced by Party membership, and it should be preserved. That said, it is critical a concise campaign narrative be clearly defined before the start of the campaign. A policy convention will enable the party to clearly define the will of Ontario Liberals while also building consensus – a solid first step to building a more inclusive and meaningful platform.

14. Strike an election readiness committee – Election readiness should not be left to the last minute. The Party’s Executive Council should look to strike an election readiness committee to draft an election readiness plan immediately. This should include determining which PLAs need the most help, and reviewing existing training tools.

15. A careful review of the OLP constitution should be undertaken to ensure it reflects the operation and governance structure of a modern political party that has clear lines of responsibilities and accountability for both OLP staff and the executive council.

Conclusion

The result of the 2022 election was devastating and disappointing for Ontario Liberals. But the resolve to do better and be better lives strong in the hearts of Liberals across Ontario.

Throughout this debrief process, we were humbled by the level of passion, respect, and engagement from Liberals across the province. We saw a room filled with people in Sudbury on a cold evening and excited Liberals on a Saturday morning in Ottawa. These are only two examples of the many meetings Liberals attended.

Liberals are hungry for engagement. They want to share their feedback; they want to know how they can help the Party do better.

The path forward will not be easy for Ontario Liberals. We need to challenge past assumptions and boldly embrace modern campaign tactics, professional party operations and effective grassroots mobilization.

The people that depend on the policies of the Ontario Liberal Party need us to be competitive. The donors, members, volunteers, and Liberal voters expect us to be the very best organization we can be. This will require tough decisions, strong leadership, and bold policies.

It was during one of the many in-person meetings we attended where a senior woman firmly told us “We are still very strong. We may have been kicked down, but I know we will get back up. We will be fine.”

The strength of the Ontario Liberal Party is not a “Liberal Machine” or paid staff, or the campaign leadership. The strength of the Ontario Liberal Party are Liberals themselves. Our strength is the belief by Liberals across our province in what we stand for as a Party and the hope we can make the lives of Ontarians better.

The recommendations in this report are an attempt to create an action plan based on what we heard. At the same time, we think the most **important part of this exercise was a reminder of how important it is to listen. To include. To empower.**

We have an important task ahead of us. We have seen the devastating impact of the current government’s policies on Ontarians. We suffer through a crumbling health-care system, we fear for the future of our kids as they deal with one school disruption after another, and we worry about the impact of climate change and the lack of care by the Conservative government.

We are positively optimistic the brand in the hearts of Ontario Liberals is strong, and they are willing and ready to come together to build a stronger Ontario Liberal Party.