

# Where federal parties stand on the public's access to information: Responses to RTIAC Questionnaire

By Dean Beeby

Politicians and parties all claim to support openness and transparency, but how many really do?

One test of commitment to open government is the parties' election platforms.

Fourteen organizations that promote transparency, united under the Right to Information Alliance Canada (RTIAC), sent questions on this vital issue to six parties fielding candidates in the Sept. 20 federal election. These organizations include journalists, environmentalists, Indigenous and human-rights groups.

The [five questions](#) focused on needed reforms to the Access to Information Act, a law widely regarded as outdated and in need of a major overhaul.

Two parties did not respond to the questionnaire, the Green Party and the People's Party of Canada, even after prodding. Each therefore receives a failing grade.

The other four – Liberals, Conservatives, NDP and Bloc Quebecois – did provide responses. You can access those responses (as well as the questionnaire and the signatory groups) on the RTIAC website [here](#).

The [Liberal response](#) did not directly address the questions. Instead, the party cited Bill C-58's "significant" amendments to the Access to Information Act, introduced by the Liberal government and passed by Parliament in 2019. The response also referred to a government review of the Act launched in 2019, the report of which is due by Jan. 31, 2022.

The Liberal response therefore receives a weak grade for declining to answer the questions in a direct and meaningful way.

The remaining three parties – the [Conservatives](#), the [NDP](#) and the [Bloc Quebecois](#) – each receive strong grades for grappling in some measure with the questions posed and for providing relevant responses. The answers range from vague to specific, and voters can make their own judgments about which platform promises the greatest transparency.

It is noteworthy that all three of these parties commit to strengthening the powers of the Information Commissioner of Canada to order the release of information that government prefers to withhold. They also agree that the secrecy of cabinet information needs to be challenged, though in differing ways. Two of the three – the NDP and the Bloc Quebecois – also make reference to the long-unmet information needs of Indigenous communities in Canada.

The NDP response contains the most specifics vis a vis the questionnaire, including broadening the Act to allow requestors access to records in ministers' offices, including the Prime Minister's. For this reason, the party receives a top grade for the fullest answers.

Transparency is a vital issue in any election with grand promises for health-care, jobs, tax fairness and child care. The party that forms government must not only be held to its commitments, but must accept independent verification about whether promises have been kept and delivered.

A properly functioning access-to-information system empowers citizens, journalists and civil-society groups to hold the winning party to account. We urge voters to carefully consider each party's commitment to transparency through reforms to the Access to Information Act, and through other measures, to ensure Canada's national government is truly open.