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**Royce Koop, Grassroots liberals: Organizing for local and national politics,  
reviewed by David Stewart**

David Stewart

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The reality is that both sets of concerns matter a great deal, and also that they are intimately – and likely inseverably – connected. Of course, elections are political theatre where the candidates perform for voters and attempt to create certain images and rouse certain emotions. But demographic characteristics, issues and campaign money and other resources provide the parameters within which such performances take place and also the tools and props the performers utilize. In one final matter, readers are advised to read the ‘Note on Concept and Method’ before delving into the text itself.

Royce Koop

*Grassroots liberals: Organizing for local and national politics.* (2011) Vancouver: UBC Press. \$85.00 (hbk); xi + 212 pp. ISBN 9780774820974.

**Reviewed by:** David Stewart, *University of Calgary, Canada*

Local politics is important and federal and provincial parties are more integrated than many assume. This interesting book provides purchase on these two intriguing issues in the study of Canadian party politics. The assumption is that local politics matter and that studying politics at this level can provide a more nuanced understanding of party life. Koop certainly demonstrates that the reality on the ground locally can belie the formal constitutional relationships between federal and provincial parties. His analysis reveals a level of integration between the two levels that many will find surprising. The local focus thus provides insight into both federal and provincial parties. As he concludes: ‘Observing the structures and activities of these local parties demonstrates that the organizational distinction between national and provincial politics in Canada is not as clear as previously thought’ (p. 189).

The approach is to study one party, the Liberals, perhaps an example of unfortunate timing given the 2011 election results, and three provinces: Ontario, New Brunswick and British Columbia (BC). Several ridings in each province are examined. Koop’s analysis is based on interviews with political activists as well as former elected members and party officials. On the ground observations supplemented these interviews and the author attended a variety of local meetings ranging from fund-raisers to nomination contests. Finally, the study makes use of election results to place the discussion in the appropriate context. This approach is successful and offers many interesting insights into the nature of local political activity that will be of interest to those who examine the territorial dimensions of politics. The book is not about the importance of local constituency organizations in election outcomes. Rather, the analysis is aimed at turning ‘the spotlight on the activist bases, constituency associations, and campaigns that comprise the parties’ local organizations’ (p. 3) in a way that enhances our understanding of federal/provincial party integration.

One can quibble with the selection of provinces. In each of the provinces examined, the Liberal Party is a major contender for provincial government. The absence of a prairie province is striking in that this is the region where the Liberal Party is most engaged in a serious struggle for survival at both levels. The Liberals have not won an election on the prairies for decades and there seems to be no prospect of change on that front. An examination of the activities of activists in this setting would add much to the analysis. As well, the absence of attention to the Quebec experience may make BC appear more distinct than it is in reality.

Despite the quibble on case selection, there is much to learn from the three provinces. The BC example is intriguing in that it is the province where there seems to be the smallest connection between the two levels. This is certainly deliberate on the part of the provincial party which needs to secure the votes of federal Conservative voters in order to be competitive in elections, and the BC system provides examples of party activists consciously keeping their federal and provincial partisan activities separate. But even in BC, examples of integration and cooperation can be found.

New Brunswick Liberals are more formally integrated and inhabit a largely rural province in which provincial ridings outnumber federal ridings by more than 5-to-1 and here Koop finds differences between rural and urban settings that elucidate the importance of geography and demographic concentration. This is most useful in reminding scholars that political activities in rural settings face unique challenges and are worthy of attention.

Ontario is interesting in that it affords a unique opportunity to examine partisan activity in an environment where there is an almost complete overlap between federal and provincial ridings. As the constituency organizations cover the same geographic terrain one might expect there to be even more overlap than in other provinces, even provinces like New Brunswick where there is formal integration between the two levels. And there is more integration than many would expect, especially in the more urban areas. The analysis reveals the important spillover effects between provincial and federal politics and in one highly engaging vignette readers come to understand the implications controversial nomination battles have on the party and how these transcend formal barriers. The role of elected members is important in such matters. The Ontario case provides a fascinating case study and other scholars would do well to follow Koop in exploring political dynamics in this situation.

Diversity of experience and activity does not always follow provincial lines and the highly nuanced discussion develops this point in an engaging manner. However, province remains important and the behaviour of incumbents appears to be heavily influenced by the provincial setting with Ontario incumbents most likely to be fully supportive of candidates at the other level, and BC providing no examples of either full or superficial support.

Too often the study of politics is remote from the experiences of those who are engaged in it. *Grassroots Liberals* is an important corrective to this tendency and Koop is to be commended for taking the activities and insights of those who make their parties work at the local level seriously. Not all will agree with his conclusions, but the book will be of interest to those who study Canadian parties and elections as well as those interested in federalism and multi-level politics more broadly.