



Are city elections unique? Perceptions of electoral cleavages and social sorting across levels of government

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ABSTRACT

A long tradition of scholarship has argued that the cleavages that animate urban politics are distinct from those that structure regional or national politics. More recent scholarship has challenged this view, demonstrating the relevance of cleavages that apply at higher levels of government, such as partisanship and ideology, for urban elections. We contribute to this debate by investigating the perceptions of urban residents themselves. Using survey data from a major Canadian city, we use a novel survey question battery to compare how urban residents understand municipal and provincial electoral cleavages. We consider two questions that speak to the distinctiveness of local politics: (1) How do electors perceive coalitions of support at the two levels of government, and do perceptions of coalitions differ across levels? (2) How do perceptions compare to actual electoral coalitions at the two levels? We find little evidence to support the view that local electoral cleavages are unique.

Are city elections unique? For decades, urban political scientists have argued that electoral cleavages in local politics are distinct from those that structure elections at other levels of government. More recent scholarship has challenged this view by demonstrating the role of core national cleavages, such as partisanship and ideology, in municipal elections and public policies.

In this research note, we contribute to this debate by introducing data on the perceptions of urban residents themselves. If urban elections are indeed distinctive political worlds, we would expect urban residents to sort local groups into different electoral “teams” at the municipal level than at the regional or national scales. We would also expect these perceptions to reflect real differences in group sorting across levels. If patterns of belonging are fundamentally similar across levels, however, this would suggest that urban electoral politics is less distinctive than a longstanding tradition of “localist” urban political science would have us believe.

Understanding how urban residents *themselves* theorize electoral cleavages at different levels of government, and comparing those perceptions to the reality of group sorting, thus offers important insights into the structure and distinctiveness of urban electoral politics. When individuals recognize patterns of social sorting in electoral politics, this recognition reinforces partisan ties among individuals belonging to electorally salient groups and can lead to further sorting (Mason, 2015,

2016). It can also contribute to polarization of the electorate, and thus to the development of a more antagonistic political environment and an increase in hostility towards supporters of other parties or candidates (Mason, 2018; Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018). For these reasons, it is important not only to understand *how* groups sort into electoral “teams”, but also to understand how the public *perceives* such teams across levels of government.

To understand how urban residents view local and regional electoral cleavages, we draw on data from a novel survey question that compares perceptions of group belonging to electoral “teams” in both municipal and provincial politics in the Canadian city of Calgary, Alberta. The question, included as part of a large public opinion survey in 2018, asks individuals to sort a variety of groups into local and provincial electoral “teams”. The survey also contained information on voter preferences regarding local and provincial politics, allowing us to determine how groups have actually “sorted” at the two levels.

Our approach allows us to address two important questions related to urban politics and group-based electoral sorting. First, to what extent do electors *perceive* electoral “teams”, or social sorting, at the local and provincial levels, and are urban residents less aware of these teams in non-partisan local elections? Second, are *actual* electoral cleavages similar across levels, and how well do these actual cleavages match with our respondents’ perceptions?

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Our findings demonstrate that Calgarians both perceive and in fact sort into very similar electoral teams at the local and provincial levels, and that urban residents' perceptions provide them with a remarkably accurate picture of the relative position of different groups in the municipal and provincial electoral landscapes. In keeping with past research on non-partisan elections, we also find that respondents are generally less aware of group belonging to electoral cleavages at the municipal level. Aside from this overall difference in awareness, however, we find few differences in the salience of particular cleavages for vote choice across levels.

1. Urban electoral cleavages: the nation-state writ small?¹

For decades, scholars of urban politics and policy have debated whether urban politics is distinct from politics at other levels. A first phase of post-war urban scholarship treated cities as a microcosm of politics in general, a laboratory in which to explore core questions of political power and policy (Dahl, 1961). While the long debate between "elitists" and "pluralists" focused primarily on power and agenda-setting rather than electoral politics, it rested on the foundational assumption that lessons learned in the local and urban setting could be usefully generalized to other scales.

Since the 1980s, this assumption has come under sustained attack from two angles. The first, originating in the work of Paul Peterson (1981), argued that the political-economic context in which cities are embedded, together with the constrained municipal policy jurisdiction resulting from that context, makes urban politics and elections fundamentally different from national politics. Unlike national politics, which is structured by political parties and buffeted by pressure groups, local politics "are generally a quiet arena of decision making where political leaders can give reasoned attention to the longer-range interests of the city, taken as a whole" (Peterson, 1981: 109). Others have followed this argument, positing that municipal elections tend to be non-ideological and often dominated by property owners who have the most at stake in the politics of urban growth (Fischel, 2001; Oliver, 2012). Thus the most pronounced cleavages in urban politics, when they exist at all, tend to be related to property (renters vs. owners) and geography (inner city vs. the suburbs).²

A second tradition of urban political science has been equally insistent on the distinctiveness of urban electoral cleavages, not so much as a result of the larger political-economic context but rather because of the distinctive role of ethnic and racial identity in urban politics. In low-turnout, low-information local elections, and in cities in which racial segregation is often highly salient (Enos, 2017), many scholars expect ethno-racial appeals to be especially important for election outcomes (Collet, 2005; Doering, 2019; Kaufmann, 2004; Liu, 2003).³ In perhaps the most systematic study of this hypothesis to date, Hajnal and Trounstein (2014) draw on data from dozens of elections to argue that "it is race more than anything else that tends to dominate voter decision making" in city elections" (86).

Despite the important differences between these approaches, both articulate versions of what we call the "localist thesis" – the view that cities are in important respects a world unto themselves, and that arguments developed to explain national voting behaviour are often unhelpful for understanding local elections. While their arguments vary about the *manner* in which local elections are distinctive – the outsize role of non-local economic and jurisdictional forces (Peterson, 1981),

the interests of homeowners (Fischel, 2001), racial cleavages (Hajnal and Trounstein, 2014), and so on – what holds them together is the view that the group cleavages or political forces that shape local elections are distinct from those at the state or national scale.

Recently, however, this thesis has come under increasing criticism.⁴ Using a variety of new data sources, scholars have argued that the cleavages that animate urban politics may be more similar to national politics than the localist thesis would have us believe. In the United States, aggregate data suggest that local policy outputs are related to local ideology and partisanship in ways that do not fit especially well with the localist thesis (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014; Einstein and Kogan, 2016), that ideology is powerfully related to vote choice in local elections (Sances, 2018), and that the importance of racial and gender cues fades when local voters know about candidates' background or partisanship (Crowder-Meyer et al., 2019). In Canada, survey research has similarly shown that partisanship and ideology shape municipal vote choice in ways that resemble their effects in provincial and federal politics (Cutler and Matthews, 2005; McGregor et al., 2016). Even Hajnal and Trounstein (2014), while demonstrating the importance of race in many urban elections, show that partisanship and ideology are often equally important for local voting behaviour. "The findings of this [new body of] research," Christopher Warshaw has recently concluded, "show that local politics in the modern, polarized era is much more similar to other areas of American politics than previously believed" (2019: 1).

Despite the value of these recent studies, we see two pressing gaps in this literature. The first is a need for more explicit and direct comparison across *levels* of electoral politics. While it is important to first demonstrate, as several studies have done, that cleavages that tend to structure national and provincial politics are salient in local politics, we also need to assess the *relative* importance of different cleavages across scales (Hopkins, 2018).

A second important omission in recent debates has been attention to the perceptions of urban residents themselves. Until recently, data availability constraints have meant that urban political scientists have been limited in their ability to explore urban electoral behaviour at the individual level (Kaufmann, 2004; Warshaw, 2019). Recently, however, data collection initiatives such as the Canadian Municipal Election Study, along with municipal modules in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, have enabled researchers to explore individual attitudes and behaviour in new ways. In this note, we extend this research by asking urban residents directly about perceived patterns of group belonging, enabling us to assess whether urban residents themselves hold an implicitly "localist" understanding of electoral politics in their city.

Before we move forward, it is important to address two additional pieces of context, especially for those who are not familiar with Canadian urban politics. First, our focus is on perceptions of electoral cleavages across municipal and provincial levels. This may seem surprising to non-Canadian readers for whom a local/national comparison might seem a more obvious choice. Canada's provinces, however, are among the most powerful sub-national governments in the world, responsible for an enormous range of redistributive social policy domains, including health care, education, and a great deal of social welfare policy. Provincial electoral politics contains all of the standard identities and cleavages that animate national politics in other countries, including ideological divides, strong party identification, and sustained party competition. In fact, because of the importance of regional politics and national identity debates in Canada at the federal level – which creates a distinctive "second dimension" of federal party competition,

¹ "I cannot overemphasize that cities are not the nation state writ small" (Stone, 2015: 117).

² For studies of these cleavages in the Canadian context, see Walks (2004), 2005; 2013 and Doering et al., (2019).

³ This is not to suggest that the authors cited here make identical arguments. Kaufmann, for instance, argues that local electoral cleavages sometimes mirror national ones and sometimes do not.

⁴ The "localist thesis" has also been challenged by policy scholars who emphasize that cities are constrained by state and federal regulatory environments and embedded in regional and global flows of capital and ideas. We focus on the more specific issue of the localist thesis in *electoral* politics.

with consequences for the Canadian federal party system and federal voting patterns – Canada’s provinces, with more traditional left-right competition, more closely resemble elections in other Anglo-American countries than do federal elections (Johnston, 2017). Provincial elections are “first-order” elections, with firmly established and ideologically structured party systems. Thus, if the localist thesis is correct in this context, we would expect to see important differences between the local and provincial levels.

A second important contextual consideration is the role of *race* in Canadian urban politics. While a growing number of Canadian political scientists have persuasively argued that race is more important for understanding Canadian politics than has usually been recognized (Tolley, 2016), it is also generally agreed that the foundational cleavages of Canadian political development – religious, linguistic, regional, Indigenous/settler – are distinct from the racial cleavages that animate much of American political development (Russell, 2017).⁵ Our findings are not intended to directly test arguments about the role of race in American urban politics, nor to generalize directly to other countries; indeed, if our argument is correct and urban cleavages resemble those at other levels of government, then the cleavages that animate urban politics should vary across countries in ways that align with variation in those countries’ national or regional politics.

2. The case of Calgary, Alberta

With a population of 1.3 million, Calgary is Canada’s third largest municipality and the eighth largest non-partisan city in North America. Like other cities across Canada and the United States, Calgary’s municipal government focuses on public policies related to regulating local land development and use, attracting individuals and businesses to the city, protecting and servicing local property, and providing services, such as libraries and parks, to the local community. The nature of politics in Calgary and Alberta make this an excellent case in which to conduct our analysis. Provincial politics in Alberta is dominated by two parties: The New Democratic Party (NDP), a left-leaning party that was in government when the survey was fielded in 2018, and the United Conservative Party (UCP), a conservative party that defeated the NDP in the 2019 provincial election.

The Calgary mayoral election of 2017 mirrored the provincial election in terms of the ideological and competitive constellation of contestants. The Mayor, Neheed Nenshi, was first elected in 2010. After being easily re-elected in 2013, he faced a stronger challenge in 2017 from Bill Smith. Smith and Nenshi combined for more than 95% of the vote, and Nenshi won by fewer than 8 percentage points. Survey data from 2017 (which we describe in more detail below) show that Nenshi was widely viewed as being on the ideological left, while Smith was seen as being on the right.⁶ While Calgary’s elections are formally non-partisan, Nenshi and Smith serve as rough equivalents (in ideological and competitive terms) for the NDP and UCP, respectively.

Despite this cross-level alignment, it is vital for readers to understand that these similarities do *not* imply that Nenshi and Smith explicitly or even implicitly aligned themselves with the provincial NDP or UCP. Bill Smith had been associated with the provincial Progressive Conservative (PC) Party, but his position had largely been behind the scenes, and by the time of the 2017 election, the PC Party no longer existed (having merged with another party to form the UCP). Smith did very little to highlight his past affiliation with the PC Party during the municipal campaign. Naheed Nenshi, for his part, has built an entire political career on disavowing any partisan affiliation; his signature colour,

⁵ See Doering et al., 2019 for a comparative urban demonstration of this argument.

⁶ CMES Respondents were asked to position the candidates on left-right scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). Nenshi received an average score of 3.63, and Smith 7.24 ($N = 1,571$, $p < 0.001$).

purple, was deliberately chosen as a mix of Liberal red and Conservative blue. During the 2017 municipal election, Nenshi repeated his long-standing view that partisanship and ideology has no place in municipal politics; a recent magazine profile of Nenshi, written by a journalist who has been covering Calgary politics since 2010, stated that his party affiliation remains unknown to this day (Markusoff, 2020).

Overall, then, there was plenty of room in Calgary’s 2017 election for perceptions about local “teams” to look very different from provincial ones – to be shaped by the inner city versus the suburbs, by ethnic cleavages, by homeowners versus renters, or by other distinctively local cleavages. The Calgary case allows us to minimize the role of “mechanical” factors that might make the two levels look different from one another, such as different numbers of competitive candidates, and in this way, the Calgary case allows for an especially “clean” comparison across the local and provincial levels.

3. Data and methods

Our data are drawn from two sources. The first is the “Calgary Year in Review” (CYR) survey, fielded in Calgary in the fall of 2018.⁷ 1975 respondents were recruited by Forum Research via random digit dialing, and after agreeing to participate, received a link to complete the survey online. In some analyses, we also draw upon data from the Canadian Municipal Election Study (CMES), a comparative election study that was fielded in Calgary in 2017, and which was completed by 1577 electors (the provider and methods of recruitment and administration was the same as for the CYR survey).⁸ A large number of respondents (748) completed both surveys.

To capture perceptions of social sorting, we developed a survey question that is, to our knowledge, novel in political science research on electoral coalitions and voting behaviour. We provided CYR respondents with a list of nineteen groups, asking respondents if each group belongs to one or another provincial or municipal electoral “team”. We selected the groups to capture a diversity of cleavages whose importance has been discussed or assumed in past research on provincial or local elections, including religion (Catholics, Protestants, Muslims), gender (men, women), income or class (poor/lower class, middle class, wealthy/upper class), home ownership (home owners, renters), urban geography (inner city residents, suburban residents), ideology (“left-wingers”, “centrists”, “right-wingers”), age (millennials, the elderly) and race (visible minorities).

For each group, we asked respondents if, and how strongly, they associated the group with one or the other electoral ‘team’ at the two levels. For the provincial level, the response options were “Almost all are NDP,” “Most are NDP,” “Evenly split between NDP and UCP”, “Most are UCP”, “Almost all are UCP,” and “Don’t know”. Because Calgary’s municipal elections are non-partisan, our municipal question substituted “Team Nenshi” and “Team Smith” for the “NDP” and “UCP” (see SMI for the complete text for all questions used herein). We use these structurally equivalent question batteries to directly compare perceptions of group affiliation across levels.

We consider two main dimensions of perceptions of social sorting. The first, which we call “awareness”, measures whether respondents placed a group *anywhere* in the political landscape rather than choosing the “don’t know” option. This variable is coded (1) if the respondent placed the group and (0) if the respondent selected “don’t know”. While “don’t know” responses are often treated as a nuisance category in survey research, these responses are an important element of our analysis, especially because the proportion of respondents who chose “don’t know” is substantial, ranging from 10 to 40 percent depending on the group. By assessing the probability that individuals will place groups *somewhere* in the political landscape, we can assess the extent to which

⁷ The survey was fielded November 14 to December 13, 2018.

⁸ CMES data collection occurred from September 28 to November 5.

groups are viewed as politically salient to urban or provincial politics as well as variation in awareness of group membership across levels.

Our second measure of perception is limited to respondents who did place groups on a provincial or municipal “team”. Here we consider actual placement of groups within teams, coding the variable from –1 (most are NDP or Nenshi) to 1 (most are UCP or Smith), with 0 being the neutral category. We compare responses from the provincial and local levels to test if elector perceptions differ across levels.

After considering perceptions of social sorting, we then compare perceptions to *actual* patterns of social sorting. At the local level, we operationalize sorting using responses to a CMES vote choice question from the most recent (2017) mayoral election, estimating the proportion of each group who supported Nenshi or Smith. We conduct a similar analysis for the provincial election using an indicator of partisanship rather than vote choice (the 2018 CYR survey took place between provincial elections, and thus did not contain a provincial vote choice question). We use these analogous measures to determine the extent to which Calgarians actually sort into teams and to determine if these teams are consistent across levels. This analysis provides an important additional test of the localist thesis, directly examining patterns of group-based electoral sorting.

4. Results

4.1. Awareness of cleavages by level

We begin by considering the extent to which urban residents are aware of group-based sorting at the municipal and provincial levels. On average, respondents chose “don’t know” responses 24.6% of the time at the municipal level and 20.8% of the time at the provincial level, suggesting an overall difference in levels of awareness. A series of regression models (available in SM2) confirms this difference; respondents are, on average, about 4 percentage points less likely to be aware of group belonging at the municipal level than the provincial level.

It is possible, however, that urban residents are less familiar with municipal cleavages overall but more familiar with *particular* cleavages that are especially salient at the municipal level. Fig. 1 allows us to assess this possibility by reporting the difference in awareness between the provincial and municipal levels for each of the eighteen groups. Each coefficient summarizes the marginal effect of a shift from the provincial to the municipal level on the probability of awareness (i.e. the probability of selecting something *other* than “don’t know”). Negative values indicate a reduced probability of awareness at the municipal level compared to the provincial level. A table of results used to construct this figure is available in SM3.

What is most clear in Fig. 1 is the consistency of the negative coefficients; for fifteen of the eighteen groups, individuals are less familiar with the group’s team membership at the municipal level. However, three groups at the bottom of the figure are exceptions to the general pattern. In two cases – inner city residents and visible minorities – we see no statistically significant difference between the municipal and provincial responses, and in the other case – Muslims – we see a strong *positive* coefficient. Both the Muslim and the minorities coefficients reflect the religious and racial identity of Calgary’s mayor, Naheed Nenshi, a Muslim of Indian descent. While Calgarians were often unsure about the political belonging of Muslims in provincial politics (more than 40% chose “don’t know” at that level), they placed Muslims firmly on “Team Nenshi” locally. While this specific finding may be idiosyncratic to the Calgary case – after all, Nenshi was Canada’s first Muslim mayor – it also illustrates a deeper point: when a politician holds a religious or ethnic identity that is unusual in a particular political context, voters may assume that those who share the candidate’s identity are members of their electoral team. We expect that this is not a distinctively local phenomenon. When a candidate’s identity is in some way noteworthy – such as a Catholic presidential candidate in 1960, an African-American presidential candidate in 2008, or a Sikh leader of a

Canadian national political party in 2019 – we suspect that voters are especially likely to rely on the candidate’s identity to make assumptions about the constellation of groups that support them. We will return to this finding below.

Finally, the statistically insignificant “inner city residents” coefficient hints at the possibility that urban political geography is somewhat more salient than most other factors for urban residents when thinking about municipal politics.⁹ However, if this were actually the case, we would expect to see the same for other cleavages related to geography and land ownership, such as suburban residents, homeowners, and renters. Instead, we find that these cleavages are, like most of the others, less clear to respondents at the municipal level than the provincial level. Aside from the two cleavages most directly related to Mayor Nenshi’s own racial and religious identities, the weight of the evidence points to the conclusion that urban residents are consistently less sure about team membership and cleavages at the municipal level.

4.2. Perceptions of group belonging by level

Thus far, we have focused on awareness: the probability that an individual will place a group on a municipal or provincial “team” rather than choose “don’t know”. However, we also want to know if groups are perceived to fall into similar teams across the two levels. While individuals may consider the same cleavages to be salient across both scales of politics, they might sort these groups differently at each level.

To explore this possibility, Fig. 2 summarizes respondents’ placement of groups into “teams” at both levels. The x-axis shows the average placement of groups, with negative values indicating an association with Nenshi/NDP, and positive values with Smith/UCP. Beginning with the municipal results (in blue), we see that respondents have a very clear perception of the coalition of groups that belong to Team Nenshi: Muslims, minorities, those on the ideological left, inner city residents, renters, women, and those with low incomes. The “Team Smith” coalition is the opposite: men, suburban residents, the elderly, the wealthy, and those on the ideological right. Urban residents have a remarkably clear sense of the cleavages that divide the two municipal “teams” from one another.

The provincial results (in green) are equally interesting. Broadly speaking, the provincial coalitions are strikingly similar to those at the municipal level: once again our respondents see a coalition of left-wing, low-income, young, minority groups on the NDP side arrayed against suburban, male, elderly, wealthy, right-wing groups on the UCP side. There are some differences in the magnitudes of the estimates, such as for Muslims and visible minorities – two variables which were also important in the ‘awareness’ analysis above – indicating that perceptions across the two levels are not precisely the same. Still, the direction for both groups consistent across levels. For only one group, centrists, are estimates of a different sign at the two levels. Overall, then, we find a great deal of similarity across levels of government. Our respondents see the groups that belong to “Team Nenshi” as very similar to “Team NDP”, and they see much the same thing for “Team Smith” and “Team UCP”.

4.3. How accurate are perceptions?

How accurate are these perceptions of group membership? To answer this question, we compare the perceptions of belonging in Fig. 2 above to actual municipal and provincial “team membership”. Fig. 3 shows the results of these comparisons. In both plots, perceptions are indicated by the purple results. Estimates of actual membership are in orange in both figures (see SM5 for more detail and a complete table).

⁹ Note that “inner city” is a much less racialized term in Canada in the way that it is in the U.S.; political elites and ordinary residents in Calgary speak regularly of the “inner city” and “inner core neighbourhoods” to simply refer to pre-war core and early post-war suburban neighbourhoods.

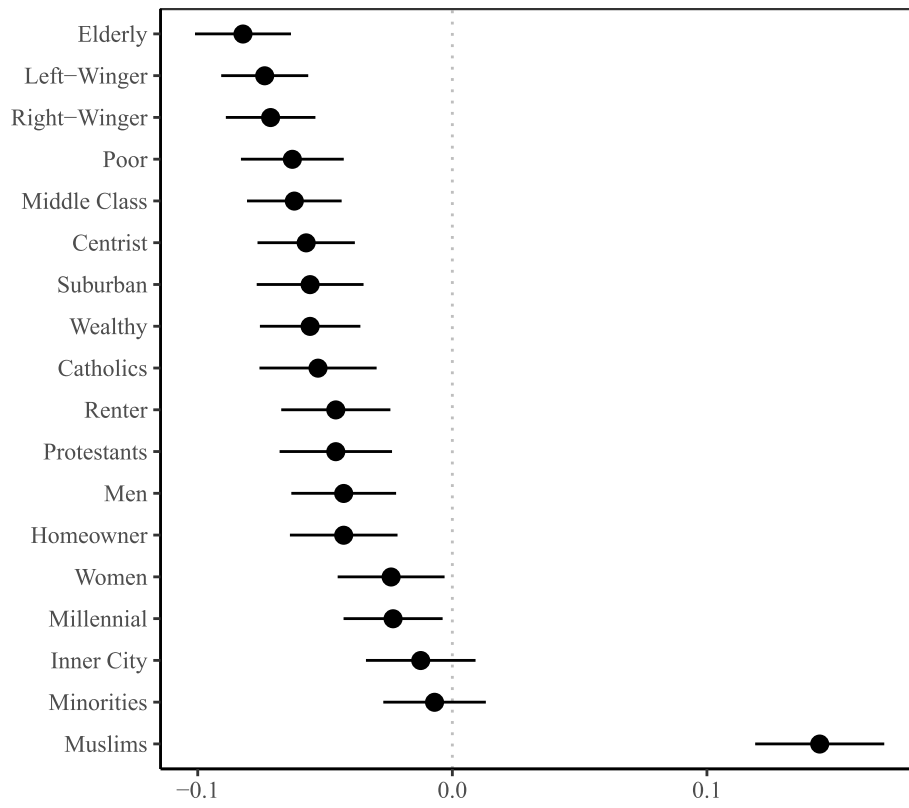


Fig. 1. Awareness by group, municipal level.

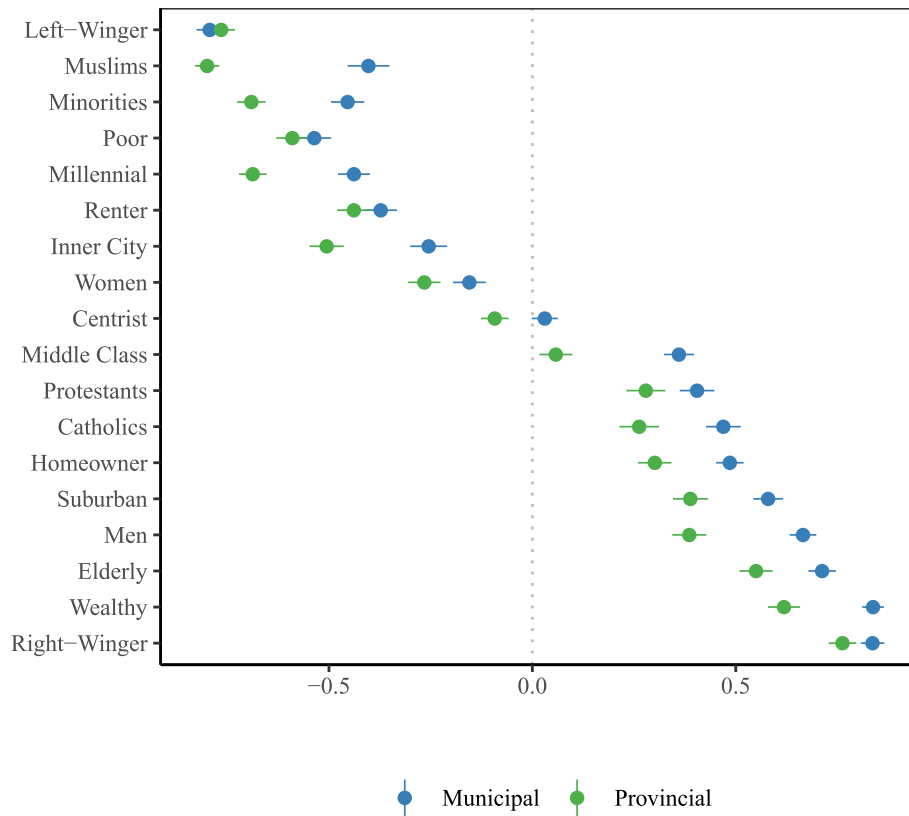


Fig. 2. Respondent "team" placement, municipal and provincial levels.

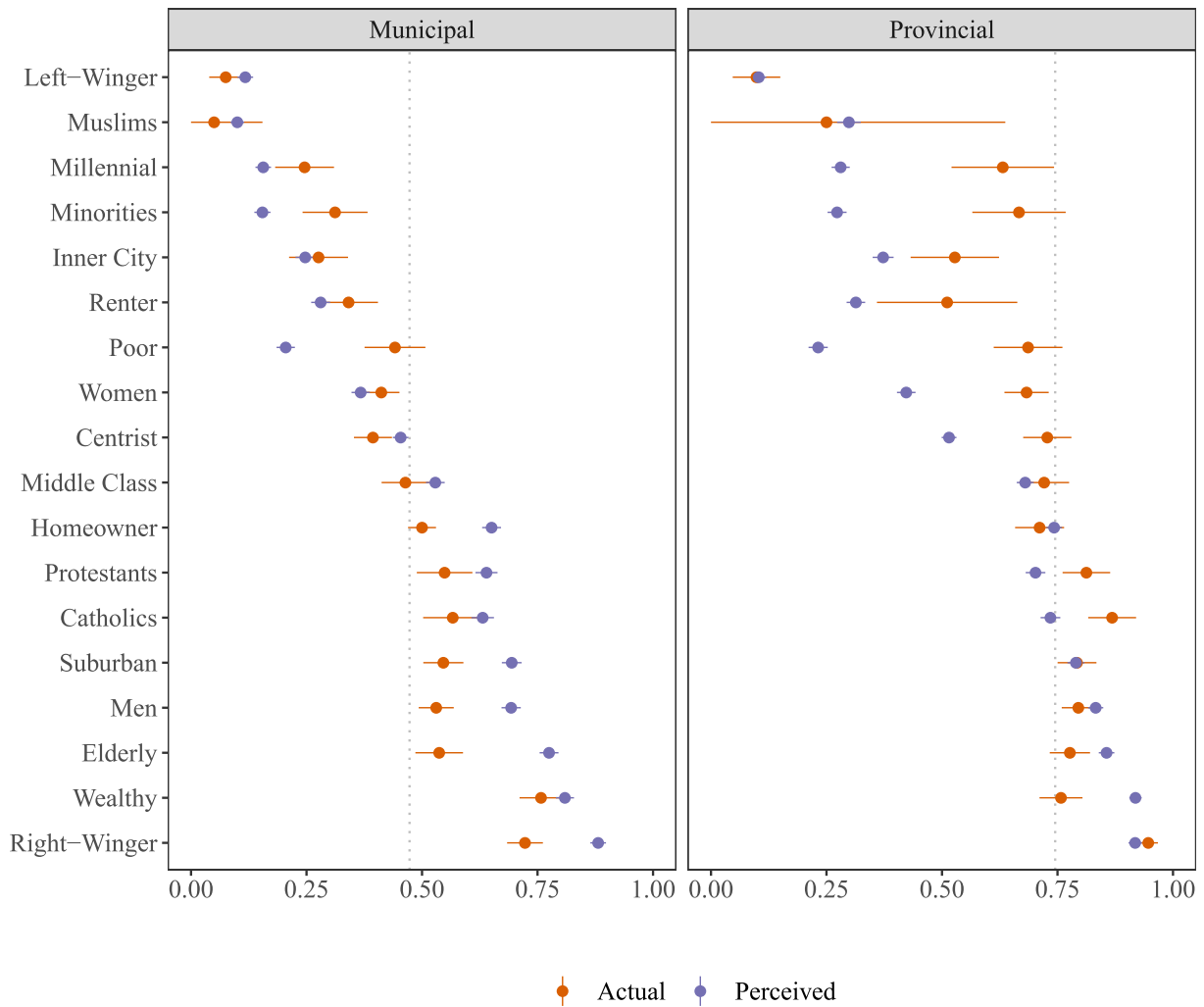


Fig. 3. Perceived and actual group membership, by level.

For the municipal results, actual membership is based on vote choice from the 2017 CMES survey; for each group, we estimated the proportion of voters who supported for Smith (versus Nenshi – we exclude the small number of voters who supported another candidate). For the provincial results, we use data on provincial party identification from the 2018 CYR Survey; here we estimate the proportion of NDP and UCP identifiers who identify with the UCP. Since our question about team belonging asked respondents exclusively about the UCP and NDP, the two leading parties in Alberta politics, we restrict the comparison in the right-hand plot to those who identify with one of the two parties in order to make the comparison between perception and reality as fair as possible.¹⁰ In both cases, we include a vertical line marking the overall mean level of support for Smith in the municipal plot (47%) and the mean level of identification with the UCP among NDP and UCP identifiers (75%) in the provincial plot. This serves as a baseline to which we compare the ‘balance’ of support for the parties and candidates. To avoid overstating the “accuracy” or “inaccuracy” of our respondents’ perceptions, we simply focus on general trends such as the overall direction of point estimates and broad differences between groups.

Several findings are immediately clear in Fig. 3. First, actual

coalitions at the municipal and provincial levels appear to be quite similar. Muslims, millennials, women, renters, inner city residents and left-wingers supported both Nenshi and the NDP. Christians, men, suburban residents and right-wingers back Smith and the UCP.¹¹ In general, Calgarians appear to sort into similar electoral teams at both levels.

Fig. 3 also shows that Calgarians appear to be aware of these patterns. When thinking about group belonging, however, urban residents ignore *baseline* levels of membership and appear to focus on membership relative to some perceived overall average. This is especially clear in the provincial plot, since the overwhelming majority of NDP or UCP partisans in Calgary identify with the UCP. In absolute terms, this means that our respondents’ perceptions are quite inaccurate; for instance, our respondents felt that most women were members of “Team NDP”, when in fact about two thirds of women who were NDP/UCP partisans identified with the UCP. However, our respondents were correct in thinking that *relative* to the overall average, women are more likely than men to belong to the NDP.

Relative to these baseline levels, our respondents’ perceptions of group belonging at both the municipal and provincial levels are remarkably accurate: respondents placed 16 of 18 groups on the correct side of the municipal average and 15 of 18 groups on the correct side of the provincial average. Thus not only is their placement accurate, it is

¹⁰ About two thirds of respondents identified with one of the two parties. The remainder identified with another party (20%), were non-partisan (9%), or chose don’t know (6%). We exclude these categories to make this analysis analogous to the mayoral vote choice results.

¹¹ All of these estimates are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

also *equally* accurate at each of the two levels. As in Fig. 2, there is some variation in the distance of estimates from the neutral point in the two scales. In general, however, electors appear to have a good sense of how groups have sorted into electoral teams, at both levels of government.

These results are notably incongruent with the localist thesis in one other way: as we noted above, many “localist” theories focus on the importance of homeownership and geography (Fischel, 2001; Oliver, 2012). In Fig. 3, however, neither variable has a particularly strong relationship with municipal vote choice. Though electors do perceive these factors to be related to mayoral vote preferences, these variables are closer to the neutral point in the plot than most other variables, the opposite of what one would expect if these were perceived to structure local politics. Ideology, by contrast, is perceived to be central to local politics – the right- and left-wing variables are among the most extreme of any in the left-hand plot of Fig. 3. Once again, we find little support here for the localist thesis.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Urban residents in Calgary think about local and provincial electoral cleavages in remarkably similar ways. In keeping with a rich literature on the informational deficits caused by non-partisan elections, we found that urban residents were less aware in general of municipal cleavages than provincial cleavages. Aside from this one important difference, however, their identification of politically salient groups, their organization of groups into political coalitions, and the accuracy of their perceptions were very similar. Urban residents in Calgary believe that ideology, age, and income are deeply important for understanding how urban groups sort into political “teams” at both the municipal and the provincial levels. Calgarians, at least, appear not to be “localists” in the way they conceptualize urban electoral politics.

These findings offer additional support for the view that the group cleavages that animate politics in provincial or national politics are not fundamentally different from those that animate electoral politics at the urban scale. We find evidence that Calgarians sort into similar groups at both levels of government, and that ordinary urban residents are largely aware of these patterns. Such findings are congruent with the suggestion that electors view politics at the two levels in a similar manner, and that they perceive that others do the same.

Despite the value of these findings for our understanding of urban electoral politics, we must also note the limits of what we have uncovered here. First, and most obviously, our findings are drawn from a single city at a single moment in time. Due to similarities in the number and ideology of local candidates and provincial parties, Calgary makes an excellent first place in which to conduct this analysis. It may well be, however, that the power of the “localist thesis” in urban politics is in fact *variable* in important ways; in Canada, for instance, past research has suggested that the coalition which supported Rob Ford, a conservative mayoral candidate, in Toronto, Ontario was notably different from the standard coalition that supports provincial Conservatives in Ontario (McGregor et al., 2016; McGregor et al., forthcoming). Research by Hajnal and Trounstein (2014) suggests that the same may be true elsewhere. Ideally, a version of the question we have developed for this study would be employed in a number of contexts, allowing for comparative analysis of variation in the perceived salience of particular groups in particular electoral contexts, and thus of the circumstances in which the localist thesis holds more or less explanatory power.

Council-level elections are also sorely neglected in urban politics research, and this research note is no exception. National or provincial electoral cleavages may animate mayoral politics, with their high-profile character, even while voters are much less aware of group belonging at the level of individual council races. We suspect that the localist thesis – particularly the view that local elections have the character of a referendum on the managerial competence of municipal politicians – may prove to be more valuable for understanding council races even if it fails to explain mayoral electoral coalitions.

Finally, future research might draw on the question we have developed here to probe the importance of non-ideological cleavages in other urban contexts. In Calgary, urban residents were much more confident in their placement of Muslims and minorities at the local level because of Mayor Nenshi’s own religious and racial identity. However, the meaning of this finding from the standpoint of the localist thesis is limited. While respondents were less likely to place Muslims on a provincial than a local “team”, those who did place them (per Fig. 2) generally agreed that this group was associated with Nenshi and the NDP. We also saw in Fig. 3 that this group was, in fact, associated with Nenshi and the NDP. Still, this group was perceived to be relevant in the mayoral contest to a greater degree than at the provincial level, where both provincial party leaders were Christian and white. While we have shown that urban residents’ perceptions of local cleavages are not organized by distinctively local group membership, such as inner-city versus suburban residence or home-owners versus renters, our findings do suggest the possibility that individual perceptions of local electoral coalitions rely more on candidates’ ethnic or religious identities than at other levels. However, it is also possible – and this is our own expectation – that when a candidate belongs to a group that is novel from the standpoint of a community’s historical patterns, voters are likely to assume, often correctly, that the citizens who share those candidates’ identities are likely to belong to that candidate’s electoral team. In future work, carefully selected additional cases – such as cases in which politicians have the same racial, religious, gender, or other relevant identities across levels – will help to clarify if urban residents are *distinctively* aware of the political salience of such identities at the urban scale.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102165>.

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