

Is Anybody Listening? Municipal Advocacy and Informal Intergovernmental Institutions in Canada

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Abstract:

Even more than is the case in provincial-federal relations in Canada, municipal governments' interaction with their provincial and federal counterparts is generally informal and even personal in character. While we know that these informal processes of municipal-provincial and municipal-federal interaction are very important for Canadian municipalities, we know very little about them: how often they occur, the most frequent channels of communication, the municipal actors who are typically involved, and how informal interaction varies across diverse municipal contexts. In this paper, we provide a general overview of these informal intergovernmental relationships from the perspective of municipal mayors and councillors themselves. Using a pan-Canadian survey of municipal elected representatives, along with a survey of provincial and federal MLAs and MPs, we confirm that informal relationships and interaction between municipal representatives and provincial/federal parliamentarians provides a crucial channel of intergovernmental communication and advocacy. We also show that municipal mayors play a central role as the informal spokesperson and advocate for municipalities in intergovernmental settings. Throughout the analysis, we describe variation in these relationships across differing political contexts, municipal population sizes, and levels of government.

Introduction

Canadian political leaders routinely acknowledge that municipalities deserve a “seat at the table” when federal and provincial governments meet to discuss issues relevant to cities and local communities. But Canada’s federal institutions do not include any formal mechanisms for intergovernmental collaboration or shared decision making with municipal governments (Eidelman 2020). Instead, municipal-provincial-federal relations depend heavily on informal processes and personal relationships between municipal mayors and councillors and their parliamentary counterparts (Lucas and Smith 2020).

We currently know very little about these informal mechanisms of intergovernmental communication and advocacy. How often do mayors and councillors actually interact with provincial and federal officials? Who do they communicate with most frequently? Which municipal voices carry the most weight in these conversations? In this paper, we aim to answer these questions using a new survey of municipal, provincial, and federal elected representatives across Canada. We use the survey data to describe municipal-provincial and municipal-federal relationships from the perspective of municipal mayors and councillors themselves, while also

comparing municipal representatives' perceptions to those of their provincial and federal counterparts.

We begin by reviewing the academic literature on Canada's federal institutions, both formal and informal, then explore the historical and present role of municipalities and municipal leaders within these institutions. Next, we present survey results that help illuminate the mechanics and defining features of municipally-focused intergovernmental relations and multilevel governance in Canada. Our findings demonstrate the importance of informal processes of intergovernmental communication and advocacy in the Canadian municipal sector, and highlight the especially important informal role of mayors as spokespersons and advocates for their municipalities. We show that provincial and federal politicians generally share municipal representatives' perceptions of these relationships, further cementing the importance of these informal relationships in municipal intergovernmental interaction. Throughout our analysis, we find that *municipal population size* is strongly associated with municipal representatives' perceptions of both the quality and the character of intergovernmental relations in Canada.

Informal Institutions and Intergovernmental Relations

Institutions are systems of rules, practices, and narratives that govern political behaviour (Lowndes 2013). Formal institutions, such as written constitutions, laws, and contracts, are codified or recorded and enforced by the courts. Informal institutions, such as constitutional conventions, are products of social norms, customs, and traditions, and enforced in the political arena. Whether formal or informal, institutions establish, and arguably determine, how political choices are made and conflicts resolved. This is particularly apparent in federal systems of government, and the practice of intergovernmental relations in these systems.

Canada is widely considered one of the most decentralized federations in the world. The Constitution (British North America) Act of 1867 originally concentrated power in the federal government. But over decades of changing legal interpretations, political practices, and public narratives, Canadian federalism has evolved to the point that jurisdiction over many consequential policy domains, such as health care, education, and, most relevant for our purposes, urban and municipal affairs, are now principally controlled by provincial governments. This transformation has been shaped, in part, by Canada's unique mix of formal and informal intergovernmental institutions.

Formally, sections 91-95 of Canada's written Constitution explicitly enumerate the division of powers between federal and provincial governments. In practice, these areas of responsibility are rarely watertight. Although the courts are often called upon to resolve jurisdictional confusion or conflicts as formal matters of constitutional law, in truth, the vast majority of intergovernmental relations take place *informally*, in the political arena. This is what federalism scholars such as Gauvin and Papillon (2020, p336) mean when they characterize Canadian federalism as a "loosely institutionalized" system of government.

Coordination and collaboration between governments are not spelled out by the formal rules of Canadian federalism. Unlike other federal systems, such as Germany, Canada's Constitution does not require, for example, provincial representation in federal parliament. Rather, cooperation emerges through the prevailing *informal practices* of intergovernmental dialogue. Actors demonstrate the rules of intergovernmental relations through their conduct in, say, bilateral and multilateral meetings that result in negotiated agreements between federal and provincial political leaders.

Official mechanisms of intergovernmental relations, such as First Ministers Meetings and other high-level political “summits” involving the prime minister and provincial premiers, attract attention from media and scholarly observers. But these meetings are, in fact, quite rare. Outside the recent COVID-19 pandemic emergency, there have been only 13 first ministers meetings over the past 22 years.¹ Intergovernmental councils and ministerial conferences organized by sector or departmental portfolio, such as the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment (CCME) or the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC), are more common and meet on a semi-regular basis. But they still only total about thirty-five in number (Schnabel 2020, 19).

The vast majority of intergovernmental relations in Canada take place behind-the-scenes, through countless unofficial channels between the executive branches of both federal and provincial governments. This form of “executive federalism” follows the unwritten rules and procedural norms of “federal-provincial diplomacy,” as Simeon famously described fifty years ago, typified by issue-by-issue negotiation and bargaining:

“Then as now, the process had no statutory or constitutional standing. There was no set schedule for first ministers' meetings; there were no formal decision rules; and intergovernmental agreements and accords had no formal status or mechanisms for enforcement” (Simeon 2006 [1972], 326).

If all goes well, intergovernmental diplomacy may lead to non-binding political agreements (e.g., joint statements, memorandums of understanding, and the like). Yet each success is the result of its own fragile, difficult-to-replicate political process.

Municipalities in Canadian Federalism

Where do municipal governments fit within this system of intergovernmental relations? In the shadows, more or less. Lacking formal constitutional standing, municipalities are largely afterthoughts in Canadian federalism.² Legally, municipalities are subordinate to federal and provincial governments, and thus generally overlooked in conventional understandings of intergovernmental relations. In ordinary practice, municipalities have no “direct line to affecting provincial and federal decisions” (Hachard 2022).

Mayors and municipal leaders have long demanded a “seat at the table” when it comes to intergovernmental negotiations. In our survey of more than 800 municipal representatives in 2022 – for which we provide detailed technical information in the next section – 95% of respondents agreed with the statement that municipalities should have a “seat at the table” in intergovernmental discussions relevant to their communities. When asked the same question, more than 100 provincial and federal parliamentarians (85%) also overwhelmingly agreed that municipalities should have a seat at the table. In reality, however, they rarely do. Fewer than one third of mayors and councillors in our survey reported that federal (28%) and provincial (32%) governments treat municipalities as equal partners in the policy making process – a sentiment that was echoed by federal and provincial respondents (32%).

In recent years, promises from federal and provincial leaders to work hand-in-hand with municipalities have become routine, especially when those leaders are invited to address municipal officials at conferences organized by associations such as Quebec’s *Fédération*

¹ According to public records archived by the Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat. <https://scics.ca/>

² Much like Indigenous governments. Though, it should be said, we do see more Indigenous governments and organizations represented, little by little, at both ministerial and administrative intergovernmental meetings (Abu Laban 2020).

québécoise des municipalités, British Columbia's Union of B.C. Municipalities, or the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Even so, municipal leaders are rarely invited to first ministers meetings or intergovernmental councils, and are generally excluded from federal-provincial negotiations even on issues that directly affect municipal operations. Municipalities in British Columbia and Ontario, for instance, own and operate many child care centres, yet were not directly involved in the series of bilateral Early Learning and Child Care Agreements recently signed by provinces and the federal government. Similarly, the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program flows through 13 separate bilateral agreements with provinces and territories, even though municipalities own the majority of public infrastructure assets. The Safe Restart Agreement between the federal government and the provinces in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic included \$2 billion for municipalities to offset COVID-related operating costs, even though municipalities were not at the negotiating table.

This is not to say that municipalities are completely ignored by “senior” governments. Slowly but surely, provincial governments have gradually expanded the scope of authority delegated to local governments via natural person powers, new spheres of jurisdiction, and increased fiscal and administrative capacity. This includes an emerging “duty to consult” with municipalities before making decisions that affect them. British Columbia and Ontario, for example, have enshrined a duty to consult in the *Community Charter* and *Municipal Act*, respectively, while Quebec and Alberta have signed MOUs with municipal associations and individual municipalities committed to the principle (Taylor and Dobson 2020).

Likewise, the federal government has acknowledged the growing importance of cities through direct federal-municipal programs such as the Smart Cities Challenge, Innovation Superclusters Initiative, Urban Programming for Indigenous Peoples initiative. Most recently, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trudeau government established the Rapid Housing Initiative, which provides \$1.5 billion in direct funding to build affordable housing, and expanded the Canada Community-Building Fund (formerly known as the Gas Tax Fund) into a permanent \$2 billion annual fund to directly support municipal infrastructure spending (even though it technically flows through provinces and territories).

However, these collaborative steps have been limited, first, by the sheer variety of municipal governments in Canada -- some small, with limited resources and administrative capacity to engage in intergovernmental relations, others large, with obvious economic and strategic importance to provincial and federal governments, and municipal budgets that rival some provinces (Horak and Young 2012); and, second, by the diversity of jurisdictional responsibilities in different policy fields. The City of Toronto, for example, claims to provide more than 150 public services -- from affordable housing, to transit, to long-term care homes -- all of which depend, to a greater or lesser degree, on intergovernmental coordination, cooperation, or investment. As a result, municipal intergovernmental relations in Canada “vary profoundly by policy domain” (Lucas and Smith 2020, 427).

Local services that are closely regulated by provinces, as well as cases where municipal governments deliver or implement provincial policy, such as land use planning, policing, and water and waste management, are characterized by “systemic partnership” between provinces and municipalities (Sancton and Young 2009, xi) -- that is to say, ongoing, day-to-day interaction between administrators and routine reporting. More complex files, such as services for urban Indigenous populations, exhibit a range of intergovernmental sophistication. On one end of the spectrum is immigrant settlement policy, where one observes regular discussions between federal, provincial, and municipal leaders facilitated by dedicated forums for intergovernmental

dialogue, such as the Municipal Immigration Committee established under the Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement (Tolley and Young 2011). On the other end is homelessness policy, which until recently, has long floundered due to institutional barriers to intergovernmental coordination (Smith 2022).

All in all, municipal intergovernmental relations in Canada are loosely organized and highly dependent on personal relationships between municipal, provincial, and federal leaders. As Bradford (2020, 12) notes in his exploration of Canada's short-lived experiment with trilateral Urban Development Agreements, intergovernmental arrangements in Canada "[depend] on political champions."

Research Design

The literature summarized above highlights that the informal processes of provincial-municipal and federal-municipal interaction are a crucial yet under-explored component of the Canadian municipal intergovernmental system. Case studies and interviews with municipal elected officials in past research repeatedly reveal the importance of these informal relationships and processes of intergovernmental communication and advocacy across a variety of policy domains. Our analysis builds on these findings by offering a systematic, pan-Canadian overview of this interaction from the perspective of municipal, provincial, and federal leaders themselves.

We focus on five research questions. First, what *channels* do municipalities use to communicate with federal and provincial governments? Second, who do municipal leaders communicate with most *frequently* in provincial and federal governments? Third, who is the most common *spokesperson* for municipalities? Fourth, whose voice is most *important* in these conversations? Finally, how does intergovernmental advocacy by municipalities *vary* across political contexts and types of municipalities?

To explore this final research question, we focus particular attention on three main variables. First, we expect that *ideological and partisan dynamics* will shape municipal politicians' perceptions of the relationship between their municipalities and the provincial or federal government. Even in non-partisan municipalities, past research in Canada has found that a substantial fraction of Canadian municipal politicians have partisan identities (Lucas 2022) and that policy preferences vary substantially across Canada among both elected representatives and the general public (Lucas and Armstrong 2021). We expect that municipal politicians who are more favourably disposed to their provincial government in political terms – more ideologically proximate to the government and/or connected by shared partisanship – will have more positive assessments of their municipal-provincial or municipal-federal relationships.

Our second variable of interest is *municipal population size*. Traditionally, local and urban politics researchers have tended to assume that smaller municipalities and big cities are very different worlds (Peterson 1981, Oliver 2012), and recent work in Canada has shown that municipal population size is an important factor for understanding local policy priorities (Lucas and Smith 2019). At the same time, other recent research in Canada and the United States has suggested that the effects of municipal population size on municipal policy disagreement, municipal voting behaviour, political representation, and policy responsiveness are considerably less pronounced than traditional research might have led us to suspect (Lucas and Armstrong 2021, Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014).

In the realm of intergovernmental relations, however, we have good reason to expect that informal practices vary substantially across small and large municipalities as a result of differences in the municipal council role itself (full-time political careers vs. part-time positions), differences in staff capacity devoted to intergovernmental relations, and important differences in the policy needs and responsibilities of Canada's largest cities.

Our final variable of interest is *government audience*. Although there is growing interest among Canadian scholars in federal-municipal interaction (Graham and Andrew 2014), the provincial-municipal relationship remains – practically and legally – the foundational form of intergovernmental interaction for municipal governments. Federal-municipal interaction is distinct from provincial-municipal interaction: less frequent, more focused on major investments and specific policy files (such as housing or infrastructure), and less regulatory than the more quotidian and statutory relationships that are characteristic of provincial-municipal interaction. We expect that these differences in the underlying motivation and character of municipal interaction across the two levels of government will be reflected in differences in perceptions about the forms of informal interaction that are most typical at each level.

Data and Methods

To provide a broad and systematic picture of informal intergovernmental interaction in the Canadian municipal sector, we rely on data from the Canadian Municipal Barometer, an annual survey of mayors and councillors in every municipality above 9,000 population in Canada. We designed the 2022 edition of the Barometer survey with a special focus on intergovernmental relationships, including detailed questions of municipal politicians about channels of intergovernmental interaction, intergovernmental spokespeople and advocacy, and the health of municipal-provincial and municipal-federal relationships. The survey was fielded in January and February of 2022 and received a total of 867 responses, for an overall response rate of 23% – a very strong response rate for a survey of North American elected political elites. Survey responses are broadly representative of the larger population of municipal politicians on observable characteristics including population size, province, region, and gender. We provide a detailed breakdown of these characteristics and further discussion of the survey's representativeness in the supplementary material (see Appendices).

Alongside the 2022 survey of municipal mayors and councillors, the Canadian Municipal Barometer research team also invited every provincial and federal elected representative in Canada to participate in a shorter survey about provincial-municipal or federal-municipal relationships, soliciting provincial and federal perspectives on many of the same questions we asked of municipal representatives. The provincial and federal survey was fielded during the same dates as the municipal survey and received a total of 107 responses, for an overall response rate of 10%. While the provincial and federal survey data are more limited, they can still provide valuable evidence about perspectives on informal municipal-provincial-federal interaction from the provincial and federal sides of those relationships.

As we noted above, we are especially interested in understanding how municipal politicians' perceptions of the municipal-provincial and municipal-federal relationships are shaped by political dynamics, population size, and government audience. To measure municipal politicians' perceived *ideological distance* from their provincial or federal governments, we use data from the Barometer on each respondent's ideological self-placement along with the ideological placement of their premier and the prime minister. On this measure, ideological

distance is simply the absolute difference between the politician's ideological self placement on a 0-10 left-right scale and their placement of the provincial and federal leaders on the same scale. We also calculate the *partisan match* between the municipal politician and the party in power at the provincial and federal levels using politicians' self-reported provincial and federal party identification in the Barometer survey.

Our other variables of interest – municipal population size and government audience – are much simpler. We measure population size by matching each municipal respondent to the 2016 census population of the municipality in which they are elected. Because we ask separate questions in our survey about provincial and federal relationships, we generally present our findings on government audience separately, noting differences in the distribution of responses as well as the underlying relationships for each of the two other levels of government. Full wording of survey questions are presented alongside descriptive results in the next section.

Finally, because we are interested in relationships that occur at both the individual level (ideological distance, party match) and the municipal level (population size), our research questions require a multilevel model that is capable of properly estimating individual and municipal relationships. Bayesian multilevel models are well-suited to this purpose, enabling straightforward multilevel specifications and producing appropriate 95% credible intervals for variables at both the individual and municipal levels. For this reason, we employ multilevel models with varying municipal-level intercepts in all models below. To account for possible heterogeneity in response rates and politicians' socio-demographic characteristics, all models also include controls for politicians' age, gender, and level of education. We focus on our variables of substantive interest in the main text, but provide full tables of results for all models in the supplementary material.

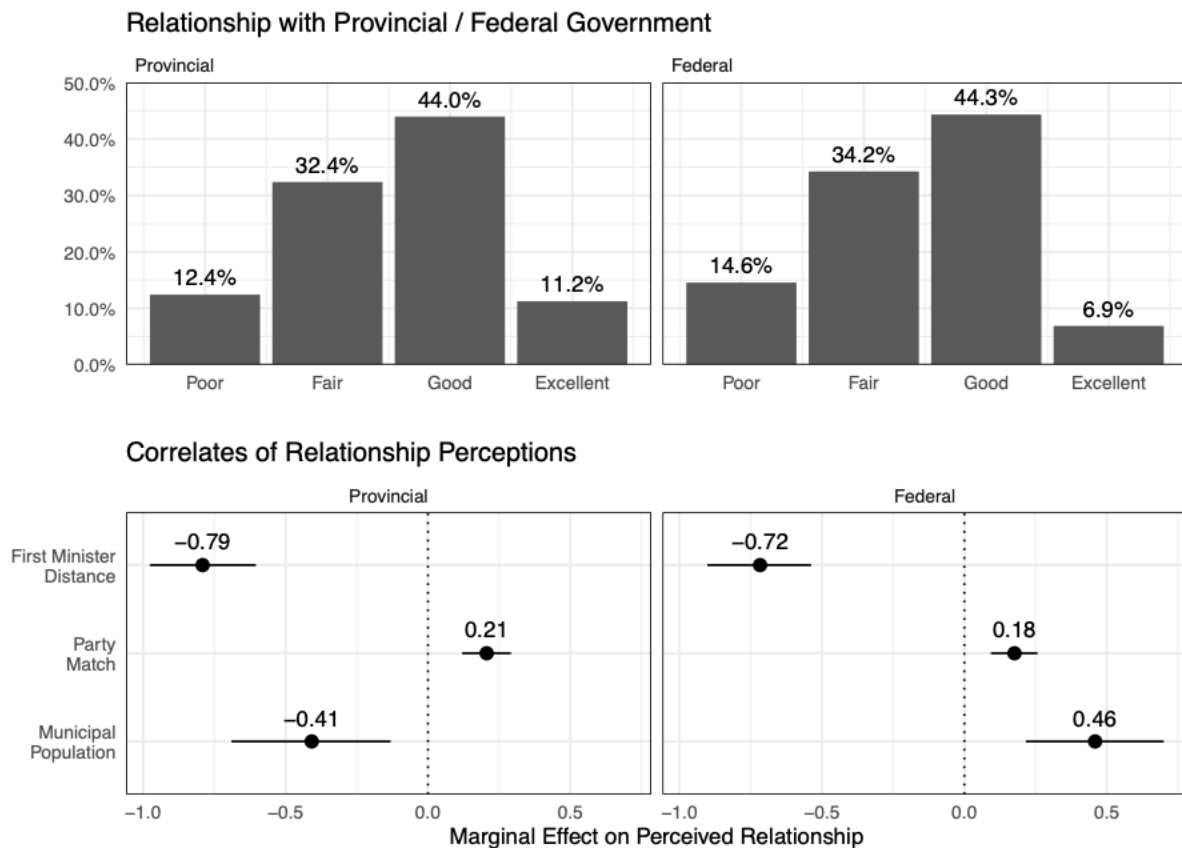
Results

To set the stage, we asked municipal mayors and councillors to describe their relationship with respective provincial and federal governments. Responses are reflected in Figure 1, which offers a big-picture overview of Canadian municipal politicians' perceptions of municipal-provincial and municipal-federal relationships. Data in the figure are drawn from all three waves of the Canadian Municipal Barometer survey (2020, 2021, 2022) and incorporate responses from more than 1,500 distinct municipal politicians.

In the top panels of Figure 1, we see that municipal politicians' perceptions of intergovernmental relationships are very similar, in the aggregate, across the two levels. About one third of respondents describe provincial-municipal and federal-municipal relationships as "fair", and nearly half describe the relationships as "good." The only notable difference between the two levels is the slightly higher proportion of politicians who describe the relationship as "excellent" – about 11% for provincial-municipal relations, in contrast with about 7% for federal-municipal relations. Overall, however, perceptions of both relationships are very similar.

In the bottom panels of Figure 1, we summarize the correlates of these perceptions. As discussed above, these correlates are drawn from multilevel models that include socio-demographic controls (age, gender, education) and also account for the fact that our respondents are clustered in certain municipalities and provinces.

Figure 1. Municipal perceptions of relationships with provincial and federal governments.



Note: Full tables for both models are available in Appendix A.

The coefficients in Figure 1 offer strong evidence that both partisan dynamics and population size are important ingredients for understanding municipal intergovernmental interaction in Canada. The first relationship in each panel, which captures the politician's perceived ideological distance from their provincial premier (on the left) or the prime minister (on the right), is substantively large and negative, which means that politicians who are more ideologically distant from the premier or prime minister tend to score their provincial-municipal or federal-municipal relationship more poorly. The relationship is large enough to be substantively meaningful: more than 0.7 points, in both cases, on a four-point scale from "poor" to "excellent."

The second relationship in Figure 1, "party match," is also notable: politicians who personally identify with the party in power at the provincial or federal level are substantially more positive in their assessment of the intergovernmental relationship than those who are non-partisans or who identify with a different party – a difference of about 0.2 points in both cases. This relationship is particularly noteworthy because both ideological distance and party match are included in the same model; perceived ideological distance and partisan identities are each independently related to intergovernmental assessments, suggesting that both ideological preferences *and* partisan identities are important predictors of a municipal politician's assessment of intergovernmental relationships.

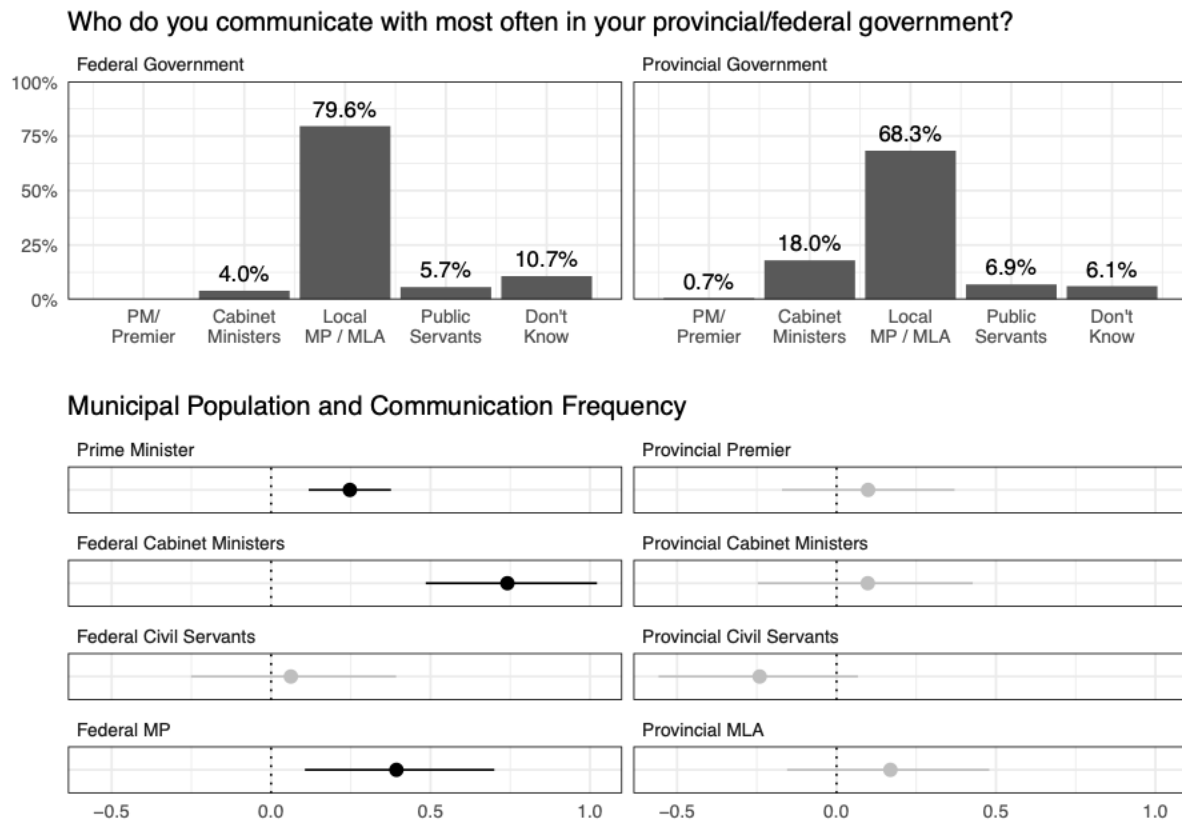
Finally, Figure 1 suggests that municipal population size is strongly related to politicians' assessments of provincial-municipal and federal-municipal relationships, but the *direction* of the relationship varies across levels of government. For provincial-municipal relations, the relationship is negative, suggesting that big-city politicians tend to have less favourable impressions of relations with the province than politicians from smaller municipalities. For federal-municipal relations, the coefficient is positive, suggesting that precisely the opposite holds: big-city mayors and councillors tend to have more positive impressions of relations with the federal government than politicians from smaller municipalities. In both cases, the relationship is substantively large: comparing municipal politicians in smaller places to those in the biggest cities, we see differences of about 0.5 points on a four-point scale in their assessment of the health of the municipal-provincial or municipal-federal relationship.

These findings illustrate that municipal politicians' perceptions of their relationship with their provincial and federal counterparts is strongly related to the level of government under consideration and the size of the municipality that the municipal politician represents: we are dealing not with a single relationship, but rather with *many* relationships, the character of which vary substantially across municipalities and level of government. With regard to provincial-municipal relations, elected officials in large municipalities feel most able to act on their own, and hence feel most constrained by their provincial governments. It is thus not surprising that the so-called "city charters" conversation is dominated by the country's most populous cities. With regard to federal-municipal relations, on the other hand, the federal government's apparent work with big cities on major infrastructure investments and pressing policy challenges like housing – perhaps combined with the fact that the federal Liberal government's own base of support rests primarily in the country's big cities – means that the relationship is reversed.

Communication Channels

In Figure 2, we begin to dig into the details of informal municipal intergovernmental interaction by summarizing the individuals with whom municipal leaders communicate most frequently in provincial and federal representatives. In the top portion of the figure, we summarize the overall results; in both cases, the most common channel of communication is with local MLAs or MPs. Nearly 70% of mayors and councillors report that they communicate most frequently with their local elected counterparts at the provincial level, and at the federal level, the proportion rises to nearly 80%. This finding reinforces past research by Lucas and Smith (2020), who suggested that municipal politicians' interaction with local politicians at the provincial and federal levels was an important and neglected element of intergovernmental interaction in the Canadian municipal sector. The descriptive results in Figure 2 also suggest that mayors and councillors are much more likely to choose "cabinet ministers" as frequent points of communication at the provincial level than at the federal level. This is unsurprising, given the close jurisdictional and statutory connections between municipal governments and numerous provincial departments.

Figure 2. Frequency of communication between municipal, provincial, and federal politicians.



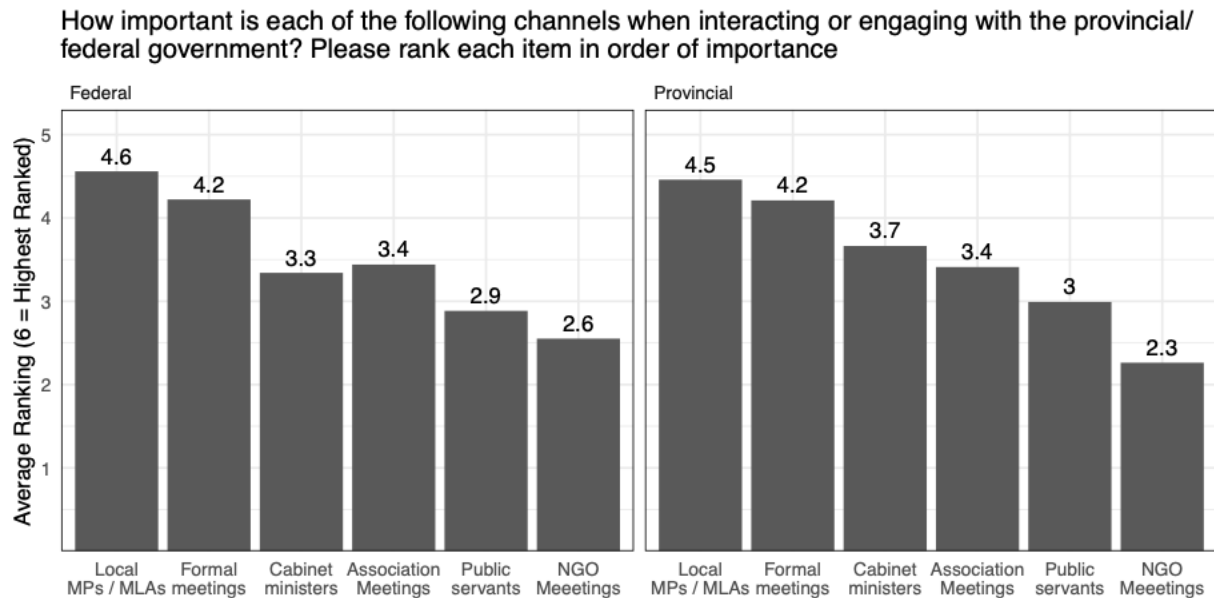
At the bottom of Figure 2, we summarize the relationship between population size and each of the channels of communication. We find no meaningful relationships at the provincial level, suggesting that communication is no more or less frequent with any of the provincial actors across diverse municipal population sizes. At the federal level, in contrast, we see large and significant relationships in three of the four categories: big city municipal politicians report substantially more contact than politicians in small municipalities with local Members of Parliament, federal cabinet ministers, and the Canadian Prime Minister. Once again, these findings suggest that the federal-municipal relationship is distinctively important – and distinctively common – in larger Canadian municipalities.

Why do municipal politicians prioritize conversations with federal and provincial members of parliament? Figure 3 provides a partial answer to this question, summarizing how mayors and councillors rank six possible channels of interaction in order of importance. At the top of the figure, we summarize the average ranking score for each channel, with higher numbers indicating *higher* importance in the ranking; in other words, the respondent's top-ranked channel receives a score of six, and their lowest-ranked channel receives a score of one.

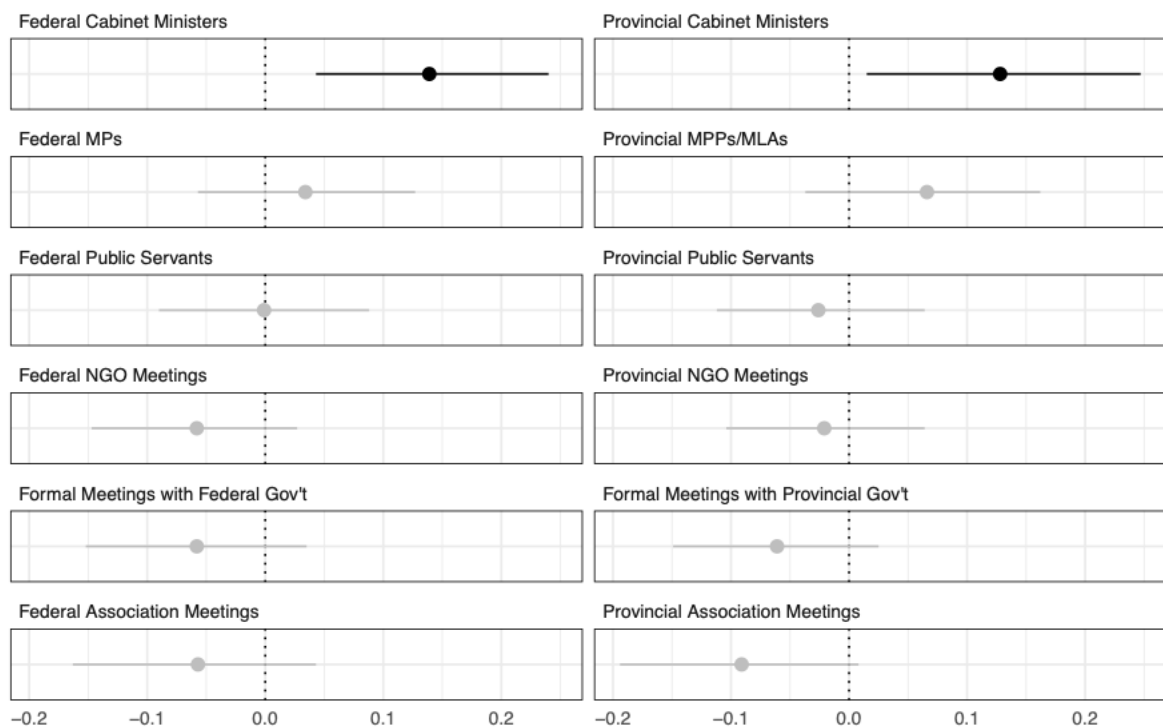
Overall, we find few differences between provincial and federal levels, as well as clear evidence of the importance of personal relationships with local MLAs and MPs for the municipal politician's role: at both levels, this channel of communication is listed as the most important by more than a third of the survey respondents at both levels, overwhelmingly the most popular choice. Official meetings between municipal council and provincial or federal representatives are ranked second in importance at both levels, followed by meetings organized by provincial or

federal municipal associations and meetings with provincial or federal cabinet ministers. At the bottom of the ranking are meetings with provincial or federal civil servants and intergovernmental meetings organized by non-governmental organizations.

Figure 3. Ranked importance of intergovernmental communication channels.



Municipal Population and Channels of Interaction (Positive Relationship = Higher Ranking)

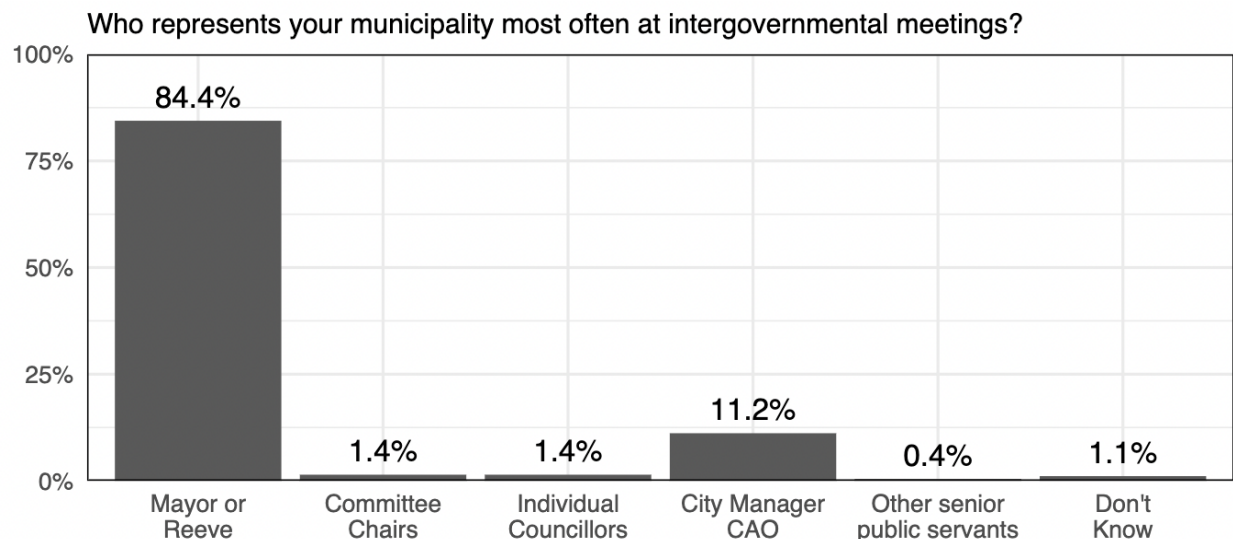


In the bottom portion of Figure 3, we summarize the relationship between municipal population size and municipal politicians' rankings of the perceived importance of each of the channels of communication. Once again, we see meaningful variation in municipal politicians' responses by the sizes of the municipalities they represent, but only for one of the six channels: meetings with cabinet ministers tend to be ranked higher in importance at both the provincial and federal levels in bigger municipalities than in smaller ones.

Municipal Spokespersons and Forms of Engagement

Who do municipalities rely on to communicate effectively with federal and provincial governments? Figures 4 and 5 summarize the results for this final component of our analysis. In both cases, mayors and councillors overwhelmingly report that it is the mayor who represents the municipality at intergovernmental meetings (Figure 4) and who is the municipality's most important spokesperson in intergovernmental interaction (Figure 5).

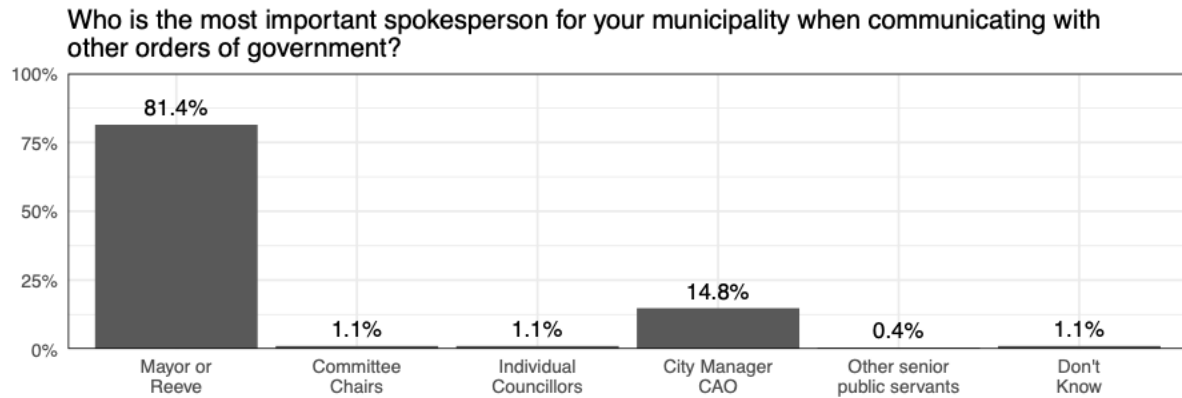
Figure 4. Most common municipal spokesperson.



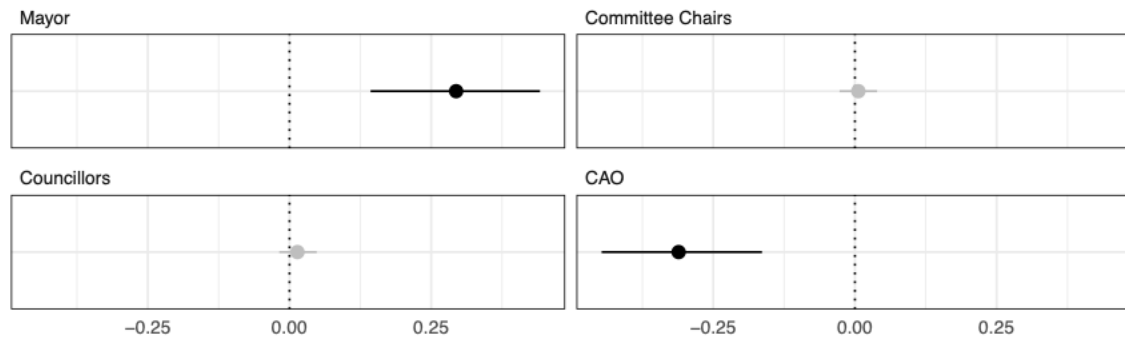
Nearly 85% of respondents told us that the mayor or reeve is their municipality's most common spokesperson when communicating with other orders of government, followed, in a distant second place, by city managers or chief administrative officers. The top portion of Figure 5 helps explain why: more than four in five municipal politicians overwhelmingly see local mayors as the municipality's most important spokesperson when interacting with other governments.

Responses vary quite substantially by municipal population size, as the coefficients in the bottom portion of the figure make clear. Compared with respondents in smaller municipalities, big-city respondents were more than 25 percentage points more likely to select the mayor as their municipal spokesperson – a very large and statistically significant difference. For the municipal CAO, the relationship is reversed: it is only in smaller municipalities that a meaningful fraction of respondents select their CAO as the municipality's main spokesperson. These results illustrate another important leadership role that chief administrative officers play in smaller municipalities, where mayoral and council roles are typically lower-profile, part-time positions (Siegel 2015).

Figure 5. Most important municipal spokesperson.



Municipal Population and Spokesperson Choice

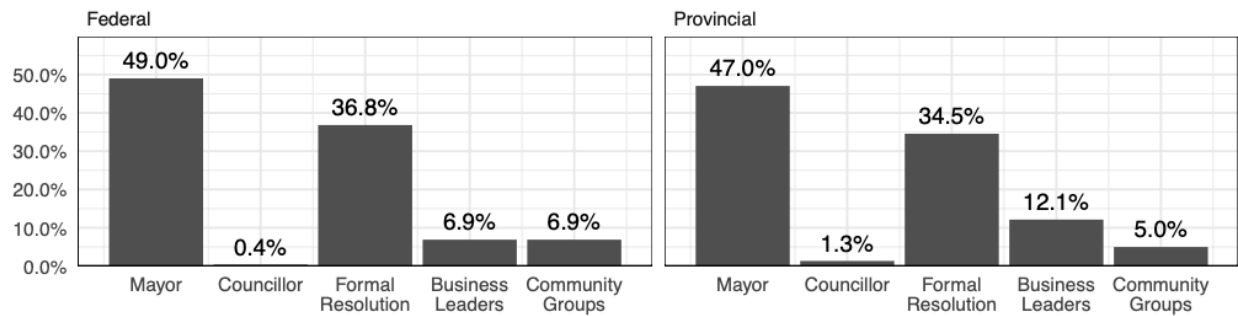


Finally we asked municipal respondents about intergovernmental strategy: how should a municipality advocate for its interests when interacting with provincial and federal governments? In the top panel of Figure 6, nearly half of respondents believe municipal advocacy is most effective if it is led by the local mayor, and more than one third perceive a formal resolution of council to be most effective. All other options receive substantially lower support.

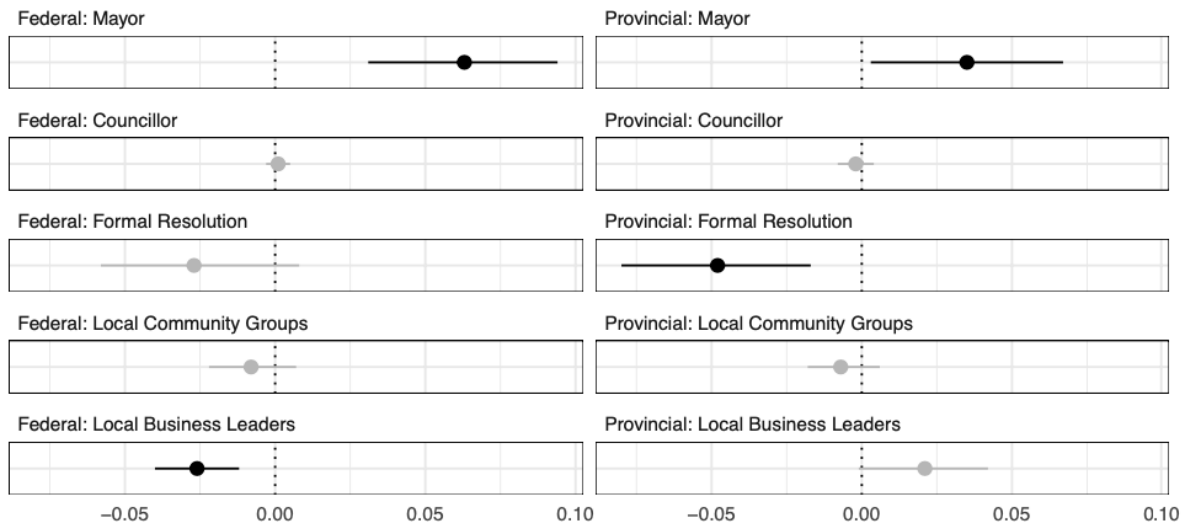
Here, too, we see important differences in municipal representatives' responses across population sizes, with the mayor once again increasing in perceived importance as we move from smaller to larger municipal populations. This is true for both provincial and federal interaction. In contrast, we find that formal resolutions recede in importance as population size grows, particularly at the provincial level. This illustrates the importance of formal resolutions as part of the advocacy process for smaller municipalities, whose resolutions often help to shape provincial-municipal associations' advocacy strategies as well (Shott 2017). In the final row of the bottom panel, we also find that local business leaders are less important for federal advocacy as population size grows, but that the relationship is reversed (though not quite statistically significant) for provincial advocacy.

Figure 6. Municipal advocacy strategy.

In your experience, when is the federal/provincial government most likely to collaborate on an issue that is important to your municipality? When the request comes from:



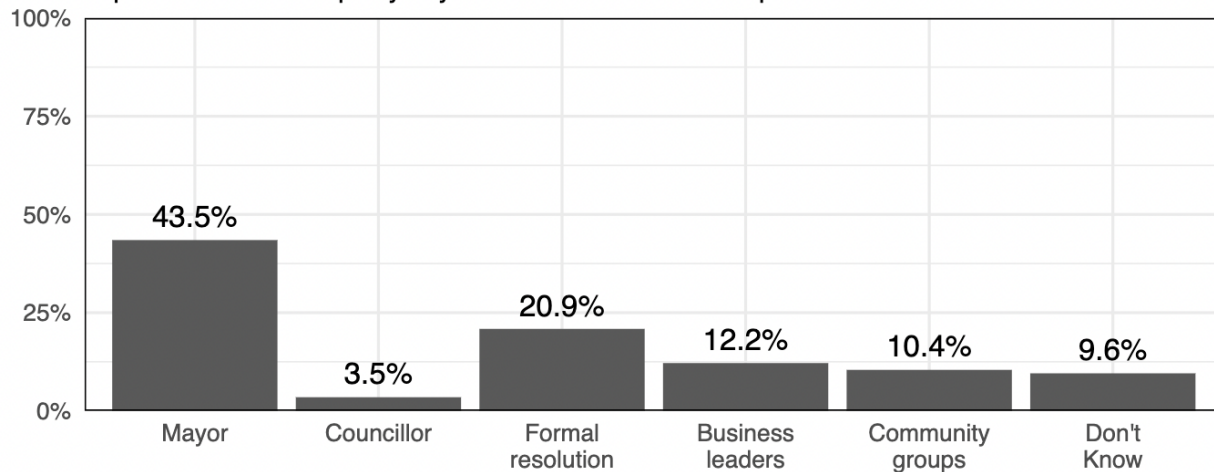
Municipal Population and Advocacy Sources



Importantly, provincial and federal parliamentarians appear to share municipal representatives' perceptions about the most effective forms of municipal advocacy. Figure 7 summarizes these responses. The results were consistent: 44% of federal and provincial representatives reported that mayors are the most important municipal spokesperson. As noted earlier, personal communications between local councillors and MPs/MPPs is the most common form of municipal intergovernmental relations. But both municipal and federal/provincial respondents agree that individual local councillors have minimal direct impact on intergovernmental collaboration, unless they speak collectively. Roughly one-fifth of respondents believed that intergovernmental collaboration is more likely after a formal request/resolution by city council (21%).

Figure 7. Federal and provincial perceptions of municipal advocacy strategy.

In your experience, when is the government most likely to collaborate on an issue that is important to a municipality in your district? When the request comes from:



Discussion / Conclusion

Our goal in this paper has been to provide a big-picture and pan-Canadian perspective on elected representatives' perceptions of municipal-provincial-federal interaction, in particular, the informal institutions of municipal intergovernmental advocacy. Using data from more than 800 mayors and councillors across Canada, combined with insights from provincial and federal parliamentarians as well, our findings strongly support the view that informal processes and practices are at the heart of municipal-provincial and municipal-federal relations in Canada – especially interaction between municipal mayors and councillors and their provincial and federal legislative counterparts.

Our findings also underscore the crucial importance of municipal *mayors* as the chief spokesperson and advocate for municipal governments in intergovernmental processes. While this role is entirely informal – Canadian mayors do not enjoy special statutory responsibilities for intergovernmental affairs – it is a role on which nearly everyone agrees, including mayors and councillors, as well as provincial MLAs and federal MPs. Like provincial first ministers, municipal mayors are key players in the “municipal-provincial-federal diplomacy” that animates Canadian intergovernmental relations. Given the increasing importance of intergovernmental interaction for Canadian municipalities, this is a role that would not only benefit from more attention from municipal government researchers, but also from media and advocacy groups in the municipal sector more generally. Canadian citizens would benefit from more information about their mayor's performance in the intergovernmental arena, and, during election time, from information about mayoral candidates' preparation and experience for the role of “chief advocate” for their municipality in intergovernmental interaction.

Our quantitative analysis has also enabled us to provide a first look at variation in municipal intergovernmental processes across differing political contexts, municipal population sizes, and government audiences. We find that the political context – specifically, municipal politicians' perceived ideological distance from their provincial or federal governments, and their shared (or differing) partisan affiliations – is powerfully related to their assessment of the success of provincial-municipal or federal-municipal relationships. This finding follows from Lucas and

Smith (2020), who found that municipal politicians were well aware of the advantages of having members of municipal council whose party affiliation aligned with provincial or federal representatives, and in having provincial or federal representatives on the government side of the legislature. It also connects to important recent work from outside Canada on the ways that partisan match or mismatch between municipal and provincial/federal governments can shape the advocacy strategies that municipal governments choose to pursue (Payson 2020).

Future research in Canada would do well to explore the absence of paid lobbyists from municipal-provincial and municipal-federal relations in Canada – a striking contrast to the United States (Goldstein and You 2017, Payson 2021) – and the ways that municipal non-partisanship may give Canadian municipal councils more flexibility in these relationships. While registered lobbying by municipal governments in Canada is quite uncommon, personal lobbying – regular communication with elected counterparts in provincial and federal parliaments – appears to be an extremely important mode of municipal engagement in intergovernmental relations in Canada.

We have also found substantial differences in informal intergovernmental interaction across municipal population sizes in Canada – differences that make provincial-municipal and provincial-federal interaction look quite distinct from one another. At the provincial level, for example, we find that municipal politicians tend to hold *less* favourable views of the intergovernmental relationship when they represent large-population municipalities, whereas the opposite is the case for the federal level. More generally, we find that federal-municipal interaction is seen to be more common among big-city representatives than those in smaller municipalities, and that the role of the mayor as the municipality's chief intergovernmental spokesperson and advocate is especially heightened in big cities. Further research would help illuminate whether this is due to greater political profile enjoyed by big city mayors, or support from dedicated intergovernmental advisors and staff that strengthen municipal intergovernmental capacity.

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Appendices: Supplementary Material

A. Full Model Results: Perception of Relationship Quality

This table provides full results for the models described in Figure 1 in the main text. We fit a multilevel linear model with varying intercepts by municipality (not shown), province, and survey year. The provincial and federal models are estimated separately.

Variable	Provincial				Federal			
	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI
Intercept	2.50	0.14	2.18	2.76	2.32	0.14	2.05	2.58
Party Match	0.21	0.04	0.12	0.29	0.17	0.04	0.09	0.25
Ideological Distance	-0.78	0.09	-0.97	-0.61	-0.72	0.09	-0.90	-0.55
Population Size	-0.41	0.14	-0.69	-0.13	0.46	0.13	0.21	0.71
Woman	0.03	0.04	-0.05	0.10	0.00	0.04	-0.07	0.07
Age	0.32	0.10	0.12	0.50	0.01	0.10	-0.18	0.20
Education	0.04	0.09	-0.13	0.21	0.23	0.09	0.06	0.40
Province Intercepts								
NL	-0.05	0.16	-0.38	0.24	0.04	0.16	-0.25	0.36
PEI	0.00	0.18	-0.36	0.35	0.17	0.20	-0.16	0.63
NS	-0.12	0.13	-0.40	0.13	0.04	0.13	-0.21	0.29
NB	-0.17	0.14	-0.47	0.10	0.16	0.14	-0.10	0.44
QC	0.27	0.10	0.10	0.48	0.10	0.09	-0.10	0.28
ON	0.13	0.09	-0.03	0.32	0.13	0.09	-0.06	0.31
MB	-0.04	0.14	-0.32	0.24	-0.08	0.14	-0.38	0.19
SK	-0.02	0.13	-0.29	0.24	-0.06	0.13	-0.32	0.20
AB	-0.17	0.10	-0.37	0.03	-0.35	0.11	-0.58	-0.16
BC	0.18	0.10	-0.01	0.40	-0.17	0.10	-0.38	0.02
Year Intercepts								
2020	0.00	0.08	-0.16	0.18	0.00	0.06	-0.10	0.12
2021	0.03	0.08	-0.11	0.23	0.00	0.05	-0.10	0.12
2022	-0.02	0.08	-0.20	0.15	0.00	0.05	-0.11	0.10

B. Full Model Results: Channels of Communication

These tables provide full results for the models described in Figure 2 in the main text. We fit a multilevel linear model with varying intercepts by municipality (not shown) and region. Each possible channel is estimated in a separate model.

Variable	Federal Cabinet Ministers				Federal MPs				Federal Public Servants				Formal Meetings with Federal Gov't			
	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI
Intercept	2.89	0.68	1.55	4.20	3.51	0.62	2.30	4.76	2.53	0.60	1.36	3.68	5.58	0.62	4.34	6.77
Age	-0.02	0.00	-0.03	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.00	-0.02	0.00
Woman	-0.05	0.13	-0.30	0.21	-0.12	0.12	-0.36	0.11	-0.14	0.12	-0.36	0.10	0.12	0.13	-0.13	0.36
Population	0.14	0.05	0.04	0.23	0.04	0.05	-0.06	0.13	0.00	0.05	-0.09	0.09	-0.06	0.04	-0.15	0.03
Region Intercepts																
Atlantic	0.07	0.26	-0.43	0.57	-0.04	0.18	-0.43	0.30	-0.03	0.12	-0.39	0.12	-0.02	0.12	-0.35	0.17
Quebec	-0.29	0.24	-0.83	0.15	-0.06	0.16	-0.38	0.26	0.02	0.10	-0.12	0.29	0.04	0.12	-0.11	0.36
Ontario	-0.28	0.24	-0.82	0.14	0.19	0.18	-0.05	0.62	0.00	0.09	-0.20	0.20	0.01	0.10	-0.18	0.27
Prairie	0.37	0.25	-0.09	0.87	0.02	0.16	-0.27	0.42	0.00	0.10	-0.23	0.20	0.00	0.11	-0.24	0.21
BC	0.05	0.26	-0.47	0.57	-0.02	0.17	-0.36	0.33	0.02	0.11	-0.16	0.31	-0.02	0.13	-0.36	0.17
North	0.05	0.43	-0.74	1.00	-0.05	0.29	-0.81	0.33	0.00	0.15	-0.31	0.33	0.00	0.18	-0.31	0.42

Variable	Federal Association Meetings				Federal NGO Meetings				Provincial Cabinet Ministers				Provincial MPPs/MLAs			
	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI
Intercept	4.20	0.69	2.87	5.58	2.33	0.64	1.04	3.58	3.74	0.82	2.12	5.33	3.17	0.64	1.92	4.45
Age	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02	-0.02	0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02
Woman	0.07	0.13	-0.18	0.32	0.10	0.12	-0.14	0.33	-0.18	0.14	-0.46	0.10	-0.14	0.12	-0.37	0.09
Population	-0.06	0.05	-0.16	0.05	-0.06	0.05	-0.15	0.03	0.13	0.06	0.01	0.25	0.06	0.05	-0.03	0.16
Region Intercepts																
Atlantic	0.09	0.19	-0.16	0.60	0.04	0.24	-0.42	0.56	0.02	0.40	-0.83	0.80	0.00	0.11	-0.25	0.25
Quebec	-0.09	0.18	-0.57	0.12	0.33	0.23	-0.07	0.85	-0.86	0.38	-1.72	-0.18	0.01	0.10	-0.16	0.24
Ontario	-0.04	0.16	-0.46	0.19	0.08	0.22	-0.34	0.56	-0.19	0.38	-1.02	0.53	0.01	0.10	-0.15	0.24
Prairie	0.00	0.16	-0.39	0.28	-0.34	0.23	-0.81	0.10	0.52	0.38	-0.25	1.25	-0.01	0.10	-0.28	0.16
BC	0.01	0.16	-0.32	0.36	-0.03	0.24	-0.50	0.46	0.26	0.40	-0.52	1.03	-0.01	0.11	-0.34	0.15
North	0.02	0.30	-0.34	0.89	-0.08	0.40	-1.01	0.60	0.24	0.76	-1.01	2.02	0.00	0.16	-0.28	0.33

Variable	Provincial Public Servants				Formal Meetings with Provincial Gov't				Provincial Association Meetings				Provincial NGO Meetings			
	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI
Intercept	2.96	0.62	1.80	4.26	5.71	0.60	4.52	6.89	4.12	0.67	2.83	5.46	1.42	0.62	0.19	2.64
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.00	-0.03	-0.01	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.03
Woman	0.00	0.12	-0.24	0.24	0.09	0.11	-0.13	0.32	0.13	0.12	-0.11	0.38	0.07	0.11	-0.15	0.29
Population	-0.03	0.05	-0.12	0.06	-0.06	0.05	-0.15	0.03	-0.09	0.05	-0.20	0.01	-0.02	0.04	-0.11	0.07
Region Intercepts																
Atlantic	-0.16	0.21	-0.67	0.14	0.00	0.11	-0.27	0.20	0.07	0.19	-0.16	0.58	0.03	0.25	-0.46	0.55
Quebec	0.14	0.18	-0.14	0.57	-0.03	0.11	-0.31	0.12	0.06	0.16	-0.16	0.47	0.48	0.23	0.05	1.00
Ontario	0.00	0.17	-0.36	0.34	0.00	0.10	-0.20	0.23	0.02	0.15	-0.23	0.38	-0.01	0.23	-0.47	0.47
Prairie	-0.09	0.18	-0.49	0.22	0.00	0.10	-0.22	0.22	-0.05	0.16	-0.44	0.22	-0.20	0.23	-0.67	0.28
BC	0.11	0.19	-0.20	0.58	0.03	0.12	-0.13	0.36	-0.08	0.18	-0.54	0.17	-0.29	0.25	-0.84	0.16
North	0.00	0.29	-0.62	0.63	0.00	0.16	-0.35	0.29	-0.02	0.27	-0.75	0.34	0.01	0.42	-0.86	0.86

C. Full Model Results: Municipal Spokesperson

These tables provide full results for the models described in Figure 5 in the main text. We fit a multilevel linear model with varying intercepts by municipality (not shown) and region. Each possible spokesperson is estimated in a separate model.

Variable	Mayor or Reeve				Committee Chairs				Individual Councillors				City Manager CAO				Other senior public servants			
	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI
Intercept	0.75	0.08	0.59	0.92	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.09	-0.01	0.02	-0.05	0.03	0.16	0.08	0.01	0.31	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.06
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Woman	-0.05	0.03	-0.10	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.06	0.03	0.01	0.11	-0.01	0.00	-0.02	0.00
Population	0.29	0.07	0.14	0.44	0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.04	0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.05	-0.31	0.07	-0.45	-0.17	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.02
Region Intercepts																				
Atlantic	-0.04	0.05	-0.17	0.04	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.02	0.04	-0.04	0.13	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02
Quebec	0.05	0.05	-0.03	0.15	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.03	0.04	-0.13	0.02	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01
Ontario	-0.02	0.04	-0.12	0.05	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	-0.06	0.09	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01
Prairie	-0.01	0.04	-0.10	0.08	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.07	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01
BC	0.01	0.05	-0.08	0.11	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.04	-0.11	0.06	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01

D. Full Model Results: Advocacy

These tables provide full results for the models described in Figure 6 in the main text. We fit a multilevel linear model with varying intercepts by municipality (not shown) and region. Each possible source is estimated in a separate model.

Variable	Provincial: Business Leaders				Provincial: Community Groups				Provincial: Councillor				Provincial: Mayor				Provincial: Resolution			
	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI
Intercept	-0.09	0.22	-0.50	0.34	-0.27	0.21	-0.68	0.14	0.05	0.04	-0.04	0.14	-0.01	0.03	-0.06	0.05	0.82	0.20	0.42	1.22
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Woman	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.07	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.07	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02	-0.08	0.04	-0.15	-0.01
Population	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.07	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.09	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.05	0.02	-0.08	-0.02
Region Intercepts																				
Atlantic	-0.03	0.07	-0.17	0.12	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.09	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.02	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.06	-0.11	0.13
Quebec	0.09	0.06	-0.03	0.23	0.00	0.03	-0.05	0.09	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.01	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	0.05	-0.16	0.04
Ontario	0.03	0.06	-0.09	0.17	0.00	0.03	-0.07	0.07	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.05	-0.10	0.10
Prairie	-0.09	0.07	-0.23	0.03	-0.01	0.04	-0.10	0.04	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.04	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.05	-0.07	0.13
BC	-0.01	0.07	-0.15	0.13	0.00	0.04	-0.10	0.06	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.02	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.04	0.06	-0.03	0.20
North	0.00	0.11	-0.21	0.26	0.00	0.05	-0.09	0.12	0.00	0.02	-0.04	0.04	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.08	-0.22	0.12

Variable	Federal: Business Leaders				Federal: Community Groups				Federal: Councillor				Federal: Mayor				Federal: Resolution			
	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI	Median	SD	Lower CI	Upper CI
Intercept	0.52	0.22	0.09	0.95	0.05	0.14	-0.23	0.32	0.46	0.10	0.28	0.66	0.17	0.08	0.00	0.33	0.26	0.10	0.06	0.45
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Woman	-0.08	0.04	-0.15	0.00	0.06	0.02	0.01	0.11	0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.05	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.07	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.10
Population	-0.03	0.02	-0.06	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.04	-0.03	0.01	-0.04	-0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.02	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.02	0.01
Region Intercepts																				
Atlantic	0.00	0.04	-0.11	0.06	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.09	0.00	0.02	-0.05	0.05	0.00	0.02	-0.02	0.05	0.00	0.02	-0.03	0.06
Quebec	-0.01	0.04	-0.10	0.04	-0.02	0.04	-0.10	0.04	0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.08	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.03	-0.01	0.02	-0.06	0.02
Ontario	0.00	0.03	-0.06	0.08	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.07	-0.01	0.02	-0.06	0.03	0.00	0.01	-0.04	0.02	0.00	0.02	-0.05	0.03
Prairie	0.01	0.04	-0.04	0.12	0.04	0.04	-0.03	0.13	0.00	0.02	-0.05	0.04	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.03	0.00	0.02	-0.04	0.05
BC	0.00	0.04	-0.06	0.11	-0.04	0.05	-0.16	0.02	-0.01	0.03	-0.07	0.03	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.03	0.00	0.02	-0.03	0.06
North	0.00	0.06	-0.14	0.11	0.01	0.07	-0.09	0.20	0.00	0.04	-0.08	0.07	0.00	0.02	-0.05	0.04	0.00	0.03	-0.07	0.06