

Are voters firing local politicians often enough? Are political parties needed at the municipal level?

For Immediate release

March 15, 2017

CALGARY- Peculiar patterns have emerged in municipal politics in Canada. Unlike at federal and provincial levels of government, party politics are weak or absent in cities. Municipal representatives are more likely to win repeated re-elections, facing a much lower threat from any competitive challenge. How is that affecting municipal public policy?

Today, The School of Public Policy with authors Anthony Sayers and Jack Lucas released a comprehensive report tracking the careers of **910 councillors and mayors** in **Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver** since their incorporation. The report shows that a lack of competition affects political choices and undermines accountability. According to Sayers “We use patterns of career length, incumbency, council stability and career trajectory of politicians in these three cities to begin exploring how responsiveness and accountability, understood as clarity of choice and concentration of responsibility, operate at civic elections. We find that the mechanisms associated with each do not operate in the same way as they do in other forms of elected politics. Stability, rather than competition, provides the major route for information to flow to voters about the policy positions and prior decisions of civic politicians.”

When given a choice between the uncertainty and extra demands of an information-rich, highly competitive electoral and legislative domain and that of a potentially more controllable low-information, modestly competitive environment, civic politicians favour the second. They limit policy differences and seek out the support of repeat voters who cast their vote based on experience on council. So, the longer a councillor serves, the longer he or she might be likely to keep serving.

Whether the remarkable levels of stability and incumbency on city councils actually do serve the best interests of voters is unclear. The natural outcome of this phenomenon is that city councils are less likely to become polarized as councillors have an incentive to seek consensus by limiting obvious policy distinctions between themselves and their fellow representatives, contributing to a dynamic where city council works more like a corporate body and less like a partisan legislature. As long as citizens remain largely unperturbed by the overall actions of their city council, they might judge the risk of replacing them at election time as unnecessarily high compared to sticking with the status quo.

The report can be found online at www.policyschool.ca/publications/

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To request an interview with the author or for more information please contact:

Morten Paulsen
403.220.2540

Morten.paulsen2@ucalgary.ca