

DOES THE LOCAL CANDIDATE MATTER?

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ABSTRACT

The paper ascertains the impact of local candidates on vote choice in the 2000 Canadian election. We show that 44 per cent of Canadian voters formed a preference for a local candidate and that this preference had an effect on vote choice independent of how people felt about the parties and the leaders. The findings suggest that the local candidate was a decisive consideration for 5 per cent of Canadian voters, 6 per cent outside Quebec and 2 per cent in Quebec. Although preference for a local candidate had a similar effect on urban and rural voters, as well as on voters of varying degrees of sophistication, the findings revealed that rural voters and more sophisticated voters were more likely to have formed a preference for a local candidate. As a consequence, the local candidate was more likely to be a decisive consideration for more sophisticated rural voters.

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“Mr. Peschisolido betrayed his electors because every voting study demonstrates that party identification eclipses all other factors in explaining voter behaviour. A candidate might believe that the electors vote for him or her, but they usually don’t. Instead party identification followed by party leadership are far more important factors, especially in a suburban riding such as Richmond, where an MP of whatever party struggles to become known” (Simpson, 2002).

“The work that MPs do is neither rewarded, nor is poor performance sanctioned, by our present electoral arrangements” (Irvine, 1982).

“The local candidate does make a difference” (Cunningham, 1971).

As the first two quotes indicate, the conventional wisdom is that local candidates do not matter much in Canadian elections. As we show below, that conventional wisdom is not based on a comprehensive systematic analysis of the actual impact of local candidates on vote choice. This article aims to provide a rigorous assessment of how much—or little—difference local candidates made in the most recent 2000 Canadian election. What we are interested in is the additional vote that a particular candidate wins (or loses) because of his/her personal popularity (or unpopularity). This “local candidate effect” corresponds to the “personal” vote, which “refers to that portion of a candidate’s

electoral support which originates in his or her personal qualities, qualifications, activities, and record” (Cain et al., 1987: 9).

We have surprisingly little hard evidence on the impact of the local candidate on the voting calculus of the Canadian electorate. The authors of *Political Choice in Canada* stress the “limited explanatory power of local candidate effects”(Clarke et al., 1979: 346). Indeed, their multivariate analyses indicate that the median percentage of variance explained uniquely by local candidates in the 1974 election is zero per cent among durable partisans and 3 per cent among flexible ones (Ibid., 352-53).

As the title of his article indicates, Irvine (1982) asked whether the local candidate makes a difference, and his response, as the quote indicates, was basically negative. However, Irvine did not *directly* address the question of how much impact local candidates have on the vote. There was no attempt in the article to assess whether local candidates have any independent effect on vote choice. Instead, Irvine showed that there were many more respondents who were unable to rate local candidates than there were respondents unable to rate parties or leaders, and that evaluations of local candidates depended more on partisanship than on their constituency service. It is certainly reasonable to assume that local candidates matter less than partisanship and feelings about the party leaders. That does not mean, though, that they have no independent effect on vote choice.

Ferejohn and Gaines (1991) reached a more ambiguous conclusion than Irvine in their study of the personal vote in Canada. On the one hand, they indicated that MPs who have better contacts with their constituents enjoy a stronger reputation, with some data even suggesting that this could pay off in terms of votes (though the authors did not

specify the magnitude of the payoff). On the other hand, they pointed out that the local variance in electoral outcomes is going down. They ended up saying that it is impossible to reach a clear verdict on this point.

There *is* evidence of an incumbency effect: everything else being equal, incumbents typically get more votes than non-incumbents (see Krasinsky and Milne 1983, 1985, 1986). The incumbent advantage is not huge, but at about five percentage points it is hardly trivial. While studies of the incumbency effect do not explicate how and why incumbents get more votes, incumbency or its absence is clearly a characteristic of local candidates, and the incumbency effect is part of the personal vote. At the same time, the personal vote for local candidates encompasses more than the incumbency effect. Some incumbents are more popular than others.

In a similar vein, Rush (2001) shows that the redrawing of district lines or the retirement of the incumbent produces substantial changes in electoral outcomes. Rush acknowledges that his results do not unequivocally demonstrate the existence of a personal vote but they do indicate that *local* factors matter, and this suggests that local candidates may be important.

The only study that is entirely focused on the question of how much impact local candidates have on the vote remains Cunningham's study of three Hamilton area constituencies in the 1968 election (1971). Cunningham considered that respondents cast a personal vote for a candidate if and only if they indicated that the local candidate was the most important factor in their vote decision¹ and if they either had no party identification or voted at odds with their party identification. According to this rather stringent test, 10 per cent of the voters cast a personal vote for the local candidate. This

suggests that the great majority of Canadians did *not* vote for the local candidate. Still, saying that one voter out of ten votes mostly for the local candidate amounts to arguing that local candidates actually matter quite a bit. This is why Cunningham concluded that local candidates do make a difference.

Unfortunately Cunningham's study was confined to three constituencies and dealt with the 1968 election. It is possible that local candidates have become less important over time. Irvine, for example, noted that the percentage of voters who say that the local candidate is the most important factor in deciding how to vote had declined since the 1960s.²

The bottom line, therefore, is that we know precious little about the impact of local candidates on the vote. We know that there is a modest incumbency effect and that the local environment does matter. We also know that local candidates are less important, overall, than parties and leaders. But we do not know how much *independent* effect candidate evaluations have on vote choice and/or for how many voters local candidates are a decisive consideration. The only estimate we have comes from Cunningham's study, which suggests that as many as 10 per cent of voters in the Hamilton area cast a personal vote for the local candidate in the 1968 election. But what is the present situation?

Our data come from the 2000 Canadian Election Study. Because we are interested in how local candidates affect vote choice, we rely on the post-election survey.³ We examine the situation separately inside and outside Quebec since voters outside Quebec did not have the option of voting for the Bloc Québécois. To tap whether local candidates affected vote choice, the following question was asked: "Now the local candidates in

your riding. Was there a candidate in your riding you particularly liked?" (Q1). Those who said "yes" were then asked: "Which party was the candidate you liked from?" (Q2). The first question allows us to screen out all those who knew nothing about the local candidates or who did not care about them. The second question allows us to identify which local candidate, if any, was preferred.

All in all, 39 per cent of the respondents could identify a candidate that they particularly liked;⁴ the percentage was slightly lower in Quebec (37%) than outside (40%). Among those who voted, 44 per cent indicated a preference for a local candidate. This implies that just over half of Canadian voters did not really care about their local candidates. But what about the 44 per cent who did express a preference? How important were feelings about local candidates in their vote decision? And for how many were those feelings a decisive consideration?

-- TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE --

What needs to be ascertained is whether views about the local candidates had an effect *independent* of how people felt about the parties and the leaders. We test that proposition through a multinomial probit estimation in which vote choice is regressed on party identification, feelings towards the parties and the leaders, and preference for a local candidate. Outside Quebec, we also controlled for region. The findings are presented in Tables 1 and 2. They show that preference for a local candidate had an independent impact on vote choice, even controlling for feelings towards the parties and

the leaders. However, the coefficients in Tables 1 and 2 also suggest that local candidates mattered less than parties and leaders.

Just how much (or little) did they matter? To answer this, we can estimate how many people would have voted differently if preference for a local candidate had not mattered at all. This can be done by comparing which party each respondent is predicted to support when feelings towards parties, leaders, *and* local candidates are considered, and which party the same respondents are predicted to vote for when preference for a local candidate is assumed to have no effect. In other words, we can compare the predictions based on the full equation with those when the local candidate coefficient is set to zero and all other coefficients remain intact. Whenever the predicted vote is the same under the two scenarios, the implication is that the local candidates did not really matter: the respondent would have voted the same way even if he or she had had no preference. Whenever the two predictions diverge, the implication is that it was the local candidate that made the difference: the respondent would have voted for another party were it not for the fact that he or she preferred one of the candidates.

Such a comparison indicates that the local candidate was a decisive consideration for 5 per cent of Canadian voters. It also indicates that the local candidate was more important outside Quebec: the local candidate was decisive for 6 per cent of voters outside Quebec but only 2 per cent in Quebec. First, slightly fewer Quebecers seem to have formed a preference for a local candidate. Secondly, preference for a local candidate seems to have had a slightly smaller effect on vote choice in Quebec. Thirdly, feelings about the parties were even more crucial in Quebec. Taken alone, none of these differences was overwhelming, but in combination they had an impact. Why did fewer

Quebec voters form a preference for a local candidate and why did such preference have a smaller effect on the vote in Quebec? Our tentative explanation is that considerations such as local candidates and even party leaders played a lesser role in Quebec because of the polarization of the debate between sovereignists and federalists (see Blais et al., 2002: 107).

This raises the question of whether local candidates matter more for some kinds of voters than for others. It could well be, for instance, that rural residents have stronger ties to their constituencies and pay greater attention to their local candidates.⁵ Alternatively, it could be that only the most politically aware get to know their local representatives and incorporate that consideration into their vote decision.⁶

In fact, there are two questions to deal with: first, whether rural and/or more sophisticated voters were more likely to form a preference for a local candidate; second, whether preference for a local candidate, when it existed, had a greater impact on vote choice among rural and/or more sophisticated voters. We do find that rural voters and more sophisticated voters were more likely to indicate a preference among the local candidates. While only 33 per cent of the less sophisticated voters in urban settings indicated a preference for a local candidate, as many as 52 per cent of the more sophisticated voters in rural areas did say that they liked a particular candidate.⁷ On the other hand, we found no evidence that preference for a local candidate had a greater effect on vote choice among rural voters or among more sophisticated voters.⁸ Rural and urban voters, on the one hand, and more and less sophisticated voters, on the other hand, gave the same weight to their opinion about the local candidates, *when* they had such an opinion. Rural voters and more sophisticated voters were more prone to have such an

opinion. As a consequence, the local candidate was a decisive consideration for about 8 per cent of more sophisticated rural voters.⁹

Overall, 5 per cent of voters in the 2000 election decided their vote on the basis of their preference among the local candidates. Local candidates clearly mattered less than parties and leaders, but their impact was certainly not negligible. Indeed, more than one voter out of ten, among the 44 per cent who had a preference for a local candidate, supported a party other than the one they would have supported in the absence of such a preference. By way of comparison, only 3 per cent of voters appear to have cast a strategic vote in the last two Canadian elections, opting for a party other than their most preferred because they did not want to “waste” their vote for a party that was perceived to have little chance of winning (see Blais et al., 2001 and Blais et al. 2002, chap. 13).

This paper has examined the impact of local candidates from the voters’ perspective. We have shown that some voters are more prone to form preferences among the local candidates. In the same vein, some candidates are more likely to be appreciated by the voters than others. Future work needs to focus on determining what kinds of candidates have the greatest appeal to what kinds of voters.

Table 1. THE IMPACT OF LIKING A LOCAL CANDIDATE ON VOTE CHOICE OUTSIDE QUEBEC (multinomial probit, Liberal coefficients normalized to zero)

	Choice specific	Alliance/ Liberal	Conservative/ Liberal	NDP/ Liberal
Party identification	.80 (.12) ^a			
Leader evaluations	3.11 (.28) ^a			
Party evaluations	3.78 (.31) ^a			
<i>Preference for a local candidate</i>	1.41 (.14) ^a			
Atlantic		-.12 (.35)	.69 (.34) ^b	.43 (.31)
West		.10 (.21)	-.24 (.26)	.37 (.24)
Constant		.60 (.15) ^a	-.61 (.17) ^a	-.39 (.16) ^b
σ (Liberal, Alliance)	.44 (.12)			
σ (Liberal, Conservatives)	-.56 (.30)			
σ (Conservatives, NDP)	.12 (.28)			
N	1159			
Log likelihood	-455.81			
% Correctly predicted	84			

a: significant $\alpha \leq .01$; b: significant $\alpha \leq .05$

Table 2. THE IMPACT OF LIKING A LOCAL CANDIDATE ON VOTE CHOICE IN QUEBEC (multinomial probit, Liberal coefficients normalized to zero)

	Choice specific	Bloc/ Liberal	Conservative/ Liberal	Alliance/ Liberal
Party identification	.94 (.26) ^a			
Leader evaluations	2.48 (.59) ^a			
Party evaluations	4.87 (.60) ^a			
<i>Preference for a local candidate</i>	1.30 (.27) ^a			
Constant		.37 (.16) ^b	-.79 (.29) ^a	-.36 (.26)
σ (Liberals, Bloc)	.33 (.20)			
σ (Bloc, Conservatives)	-.03 (.41)			
N	464			
Log likelihood	-159.65			
% Correctly predicted	88			

a: significant $\alpha \leq .01$; b: significant $\alpha \leq .05$

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NOTES

¹ Respondents could choose among the four following factors: the leader, the party, the issues and the local candidate. Twenty-six per cent chose the local candidate.

² See Irvine, 1982: 761, Table 1. Irvine reports the trend between 1965 and 1979. Note, however, that the response categories changed over time, making comparisons quite difficult.

³ The study included a rolling cross-section campaign survey with a representative sample of 3651 respondents, as well as a post-election survey of 2862 of the campaign respondents. The response rate for the campaign survey was 60 per cent. The fieldwork was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University and Jolicoeur & Associés. The study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Elections Canada, and the Institute for Research on Public Policy. Copies of the survey questionnaires and of the data set can be obtained at: www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/ces-eeec.

⁴ Forty per cent answered “yes” to Q1 but 3 per cent of them (and 1% of the total post-election sample) could not name a party (they said “don’t know” or refused). Throughout the analysis, only those who could name the party’s candidate that they particularly liked are considered to have a preference for a local candidate.

⁵ For evidence that rural residents are more strongly connected to their milieu, see Putnam, 2000.

⁶ This would be consistent with the view that the most politically sophisticated consider a greater range of factors when making up their mind than the least sophisticated. See Sniderman et al., 1991.

⁷ Both sophistication and residence seem to matter. The percentages indicating a preference for a local candidate were 43 per cent among the most informed urban voters and 44 per cent among the least informed rural residents.

⁸ We performed two tests. First, we added interaction terms (Local Candidate X Rural; or Local Candidate X Sophisticated) to the multinomial probit model presented in Table 1. Neither interaction term proved to be significant. Second, we performed separate multinomial probit analyses of vote choice among rural and urban voters, as well as among more and less sophisticated voters. The local candidate coefficients were quite similar among all subgroups. These analyses dealt with voters outside Quebec (the smaller Quebec sample makes it more difficult to detect interaction effects).

⁹ We arrive at that estimate with the same kind of simulation as those reported above, on the basis of multinomial probit estimations of vote choice outside Quebec among sophisticated rural voters.