

Why Do Urban Issues Rise on the Federal Policy Agenda in Canada?

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, the federal government under Paul Martin Jr. developed a cities and communities agenda, with Ottawa prepared to play a much more active role in and with municipalities. The pendulum has swung back under the Harper government, which is far less inclined to intrude into this area of provincial jurisdiction. But these recent developments are not unique. The federal government was active on the urban file in the 1970s through the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. And there have been other historical instances of federal involvement.

This paper explores the factors that are associated with the federal government's interest in urban issues. The time period covered is 1867-2005. The methodology is that common in the agenda-setting literature – cross-correlation functions and lagged correlations. The dependent variable - the place of municipalities and urban issues on the policy agenda - is measured in a variety of ways. The independent variables that we think may be operative are three: rapid population growth in cities, restructuring of municipal systems by provincial governments, and financial stress. The analysis investigates the strength of each factor in placing urban issues on the national policy agenda.

In the end, there is no single explanatory model to explain the rise of municipal issues on the agenda: history matters.

## **1. Introduction**

How issues get onto the policy agenda is an intriguing question. Since the seminal work by McCombs and Shaw (1972), an enormous flow of work on agenda-setting has been produced by political scientists, sociologists and communications scholars.

Our focus here is on municipalities and urban issues in Canada, and we explore the factors that might bring them to the fore on the national policy agenda. This is theoretically interesting because cities and most other local authorities in Canada fall under provincial jurisdiction, so there is no federal responsibility for them or obligation to confront their problems. This suggests that federalism may constitute a hurdle to the entry of municipal issues onto Ottawa's policy agenda. But Canadian federal governments have intermittently turned towards urban issues, and recently notable was the A New Deal for Cities<sup>®</sup> proclaimed by Paul Martin, Prime Minister from 2003 to 2006. This placed the problem of agenda-setting back onto the research agenda of Canadian urban scholars - but only in a rhetorical sense (Andrew, Graham and Phillips, 2002). Given the nature of the urban policy field and its constitutional position in Canada, it might take particular forces to push it onto the national policy agenda, but these have not been systematically explored.

The literature on agenda-setting has flowed in many directions since 1972, and it has produced some stellar contributions and some interesting methodological debates. At its core, though, is research into three distinct agendas and their interactions. First is the media agenda, generally assessed by the number and prominence of news stories about particular issues or problems. Second is the public agenda: opinion polling generally measures the relative concern of the citizenry about various issues. Last is the policy agenda, which refers to issues investigated or debated by policy makers (normally politicians rather than officials). The bulk of agenda-setting research has explored whether the media affects the agendas of the public and the politicians, but all sets of possible interactions have been studied, with considerable agreement that all causal relationships are recursive.

Few studies in this tradition push the analysis towards what governments concretely do in the policy areas that are more or less prominent on the various agendas, though there are some notable exceptions. Similarly, only a small number of studies have been concerned with the impact on agenda-setting of objective factors. Finally, the bulk of these studies cover relatively short time spans. Our study does not explore what federal governments in Canada have actually done about urban issues or municipalities more generally, in terms of legislation, administrative agencies, or expenditures and transfers. We do, however, cover a very long time span, from 1867, just after the creation of the federation, until 2005. And we are primarily concerned with objective factors. In fact, given the tight inter-correlations normally found between the media, public and policy agendas, we integrate measures of these and try to explain overall variation in the prominence of urban issues as a function of three explanatory variables - demographic pressures, fiscal stress, and municipal restructuring undertaken by provincial governments. Of course we do not presume that any or all of these factors has a constant influence over time on the federal urban agenda.

## **2. Municipalities on the federal policy agenda in Canada**

When he was minister of Finance, Paul Martin gave a speech to the Federation of

Canadian Municipalities (FCM), the municipal lobby organization in Ottawa. Outlining the problems, challenges and opportunities confronting Canadian municipalities - which the FCM had recited for some time - he promised a *A New Deal* for them, hinting at funding increases, new programs and perhaps new revenue sources, and committing himself to formal pre-budget consultation with a group of mayors (Martin 2002).

One of his very first initiatives as Prime Minister was to create a Cities Secretariat within the Privy Council Office, with a Parliamentary Secretary who soon became a Minister of State responsible for the new portfolio of Infrastructure and Communities. The 2004 budget, as promised, provided that municipalities would receive a 100% rebate of their sales tax payments, a benefit estimated at \$7 billion over 10 years. In the 2005 budget, the government pledged \$5 billion in transfers - nominally from the federal share of the tax on gasoline - to municipalities over the coming five years, with the \$600 million allocated in 2005-06 set to rise to \$2 billion by 2009-10 (Canada, 2005). More important, two tripartite agreements were renewed. One involved Winnipeg, where efforts were to be devoted to urban re-development, economic competitiveness and creating more opportunities for Aboriginal people. Another, the Vancouver Agreement, targeted community building in a depressed central area, through a highly co-ordinated approach of many agencies. The expressed belief was that by working more closely together, all three orders of government can foster and enhance sustainable economic, social, health and community development in the City of Vancouver (Vancouver Agreement, 2005, 2). Further agreements followed with Saskatchewan and Regina and Saskatoon, and more were to follow, notably with Victoria and Toronto. All of this represented a stunning incursion into the urban field, but it came to an end soon after the Martin government was defeated by Stephen Harper's Conservatives, which took a very different view of the appropriate role of the federal government in urban matters (Young, 2006).

Several proximate causes advanced this recent urban intervention by the federal government. Most immediate was the pressure from Members of Parliament in the government caucus. Following the 2000 election, most of the MPs from the census metropolitan areas of the three largest conurbations - Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver - were in the Liberal caucus of the government led by Jean Chrétien, (with the Liberals sweeping all 35 Toronto seats). Mr. Chrétien was very cautious about interfering in provincial jurisdiction, especially where the province of Quebec was concerned. But he took the unusual step of creating a Caucus Task Force on Urban Issues, headed by Judy Sgro. This device provided an excuse for inaction, which could be maintained after the Task Force advocated federal initiatives in three tightly circumscribed areas where Ottawa had some jurisdictional legitimacy and historical presence - infrastructure, social housing and urban transit (Prime Minister's Caucus Task Force, 2002).

There was also a vigorous media campaign in favour of federal intervention mounted by the *Toronto Star*, which documented the city's decline in services and infrastructure. This campaign worked in tandem with the efforts of the FCM, which had bolstered its budget and policy work, and lobbied hard for more financial assistance to municipalities. Its recent offshoot, the Big City Mayors Caucus, added high-profile impetus to the campaign. Also visible was business. Toronto's cause, in particular, was backed by the Toronto Board of Trade and a new broad coalition, the Toronto City Summit Alliance. More generally, the urban cause was supported by the Conference Board of Canada and a major bank (TD Bank Financial Group, 2002). Finally, some academics called for more investment in cities, arguing that senior

governments could ignore neither the cities' contribution to national competitiveness in a globalizing economy nor the social problems that were emerging (Courchene, 2001; Bradford, 2002).

We believe that these pressures reflected underlying causes. One is demographic change. Cities have recently experienced substantial population growth, some from rural-urban migration but more from international in-migration. The population of the Toronto census metropolitan area grew by 20% between 1991 and 2001, while Montreal grew by 10%. (Canada, various censuses). In 2006, 45.4% of Toronto's population was foreign born, and 34.9% of these 2,320,165 people had arrived in Canada during the preceding 10 years (Canada, 2006). Such demographic change produces many strains which show up as urban problems. There are pressures on housing prices and overcrowding. There are big new infrastructure needs. There are issues of social inclusion involving ethnicity and religion, and sharpening disparities in the distribution of income and wealth, both of which are associated with highly visible pathologies such as drugs and crime. All of these problems may attract the attention, through proximate channels, of the federal government.

A second basic causal factor, we posit, is financial distress. This is associated with population growth, but it also accompanies population decline in smaller municipalities where fixed costs have to be spread across fewer taxpayers (Bourne, 2003). Distress can also be caused by recession and the consequent non-payment of taxes and decline in user-fee collections. As has recently been the case in some municipalities, financial stress can be the consequence of reduced transfers from provincial governments, the offloading of service responsibilities from provinces to municipalities, and new regulatory frameworks that require action but are not accompanied by new funding. Financial distress, we posit, will cause direct appeals to be made by municipalities to the federal government and will trigger at least some of the proximate causes of recent federal policy initiatives.

Our last causal factor involves amalgamations and, more generally, major changes in the municipal system of a province. The provincial governments control municipalities closely: from time to time, they make very substantial changes to the statutes governing municipalities' functions and finances (see, for example, Young, 1987). As in the recent cases of Toronto, Montreal and Halifax, they can also force amalgamations (indeed, in Ontario the number of municipalities dropped from 850 to 445 between 1996 and 2000). We believe that structural change produces pressure on the federal government in two ways. First, these changes are often painful and disruptive to municipal leaders and citizens, and they may turn towards Ottawa for redress, despite the discouraging constitutional constraints. Second, restructuring heightens citizens' interest in municipalities and the salience of urban issues, so demands flow to the central government to deal with particular problems.

Such clear hypotheses have never been put to the test in the Canadian case. There is no systematic study of when urban issues rise on the federal policy agenda. We do have qualitative accounts. Wolfe (2003) identifies the following periods and causes of federal urban policy initiatives:

- § early 1900s: rapid growth, overcrowding, vice and crime, corruption, returning WWI veterans,
- § 1930s depression: unemployment, poverty, crowding, poor housing,
- § post WWII: overcrowding, poor housing, returning veterans, deferred investment,

- § late 1960s: rapid growth, housing shortages, rising prices, environment and conservation movements,
- § early 2000s: lack of affordable housing, vulnerable populations, aging infrastructure, transit, competitiveness.

Instead of a measure of whether urban issues were on the agenda – that is, being discussed by policy makers, the media and the broader public - Wolfe focuses on concrete policy initiatives, such as the 1935 Dominion Housing Act, and on institutional change, such as the creation of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs in 1971. So this brief and impressionistic account is helpful, but not adequate. Sancton (2008) has a similar short history of federal involvement, focusing on legislation and funding: he argues that the 1960s initiatives were caused by fear of following the American pattern of urban decay and that current concern arises from fears of losing urban competitiveness. Again, though, the focus is on action rather than the agenda *per se*, and the exploration is unsystematic.

### 3. The agenda-setting literature

During the 1968 American presidential election campaign, McCombs and Shaw (1972) interviewed 100 uncommitted voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, asking what were the key issues of the campaign. Over the same period, they analyzed the content of the main media sources in the city - local and national newspapers, news magazines and television networks - distinguishing major and minor items of news coverage. They found a simple correlation of .967 between the major news items and voters' priorities. Among voters leaning towards a party, they found no evidence of selective attention to issues covered only in stories about that party. And they found high inter-correlations in coverage among the media outlets. They noted that the great bulk of voters had no other experience of the campaign than through the media, and that the media, which were mostly national and state-wide in dissemination, were not tailoring their coverage to the priorities of Chapel Hill voters. Hence, while all this did not conclusively prove that the media set the public's agenda, the evidence is in line with the conditions that must exist if agenda-setting by the mass media does occur. (184)

From this has flowed a great deal of research and analysis. (For overviews, see Rogers and Dearing (1988), Rogers, Dearing and Bregman (1993), Dearing and Rogers (1996), Busenburg, 2003), Takeshita (2005), and Wanta and Ghanen (2007).) Many studies soon came to focus not just on the media agenda and the public agenda but also on the policy agenda, conceptualizing the issue agenda of governmental bodies or elected officials as the main dependent variable. (Rogers, Dearing and Bregman, 1993: 69). Others pushed further forward into concrete action, despite Downs's (1972) cynicism about how waves of public and political enthusiasms often crash on the shoals of problem intractability. Jones and Baumgartner (2004: 4), typically, found evidence of an impressive correspondence between the ranking of 19 different priority areas within the public agenda and the Congressional agenda, but weaker and more mixed relationships between these and the content of actual statutory outputs. Peters and Hogwood (1985) related the public agenda to organizational change within the American federal bureaucracy.

Others included objective factors in their analyses. Walker (1977), for example, incorporated the real number of traffic deaths and coal-mining deaths into an investigation of media coverage and government statutory action on these safety issues. Blood and Phillips (1997) included leading economic indicators as a variable in a study of public perceptions, media

economic reporting and presidential popularity, and Hill (1998) showed how objective economic factors, as well as Presidential attention, moved the public agenda. Most thoroughly, Soroka (2002) incorporated real-world measures of the severity of seven important issues - AIDS, crime, the public debt, the environment, inflation, taxes and unemployment - into a study of the interaction of the public, media and policy agendas.

Work has also focused on other media, especially television (Brosius and Kepplinger, 1990, 1992). Studies soon spread to non-American contexts (Cobb, Ross and Ross, 1976; Howlett, 1997, 1998; Martin, 2004). Other studies have introduced the courts into the agenda-setting process (Hays and Glick, 1997), along with the impact of scientific evidence (Walker 1977; Kamiemiecki, 2000), the susceptibility of issues to re-definition (Pralle, 2006), the capacity of different political arenas to carry issues (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), and the two-step flow of communications in mass publics (Yang and Stone, 2002). As well as general reflections about the implications of agenda-setting for democratic theory (Cobb and Elder, 1971), there have been major elaborations of theory internal to the tradition. In considering policy makers, for example, Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993) distinguish between the symbolic and the resource agendas. Newig (2004) differentiates public attention, which may change rapidly, from public opinion, which evolves slowly. On the media agenda, Rogers and Dearing (1988) distinguish between issues and events. And Soroka (2002) analyzes types of issue: they may be >prominent= (affecting many people directly, like inflation), >sensational= (like crime or AIDS), or >governmental= (important mainly to politicians and officials, like the debt or national unity).

With respect to time span there are two traditions. The first explores relationships between agendas over the very short term. Brosius and Kepplinger (1992) analyzed the effect of television news agendas on public priorities in Germany over the course of a single year, using weekly measures. Cohen (1995) studied the effect of the policy agenda, represented by presidential State of the Union addresses, on the public agenda, as measured by shifts in Gallup poll results that occurred in the first post-address poll. And Gozenbach (1992) examined the interplay between press coverage, public opinion and presidential proclamations on the drug issue during the 1985-90 period, using monthly measures. Others choose much longer periods. Ader (1995) studied agenda setting in environmental pollution over the 1970-90 period, and Peters and Hogwood (1985) examined institutional change between 1930 and 1980. In a non-quantitative fashion, Rochefort (1988) theorized about cycles in mental health approaches over a 160 year period. In their monumental study *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (1993), Baumgartner and Jones explored some issue-areas over the whole post-WWII period, while several of their media studies extended from 1900 to 1990.<sup>1</sup>

A final characteristic of the literature concerns methodological problems. One is data shortages, necessitating interpolation in many cases (Hayes and Glick [1997]; Gozenbach [1992:

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<sup>1</sup>The book's core notion was that of >punctuated equilibria.= Long periods of policy stability are shaken when problems are redefined and citizens mobilized; with positive feedback mechanisms working, policy systems are disrupted and policy agendas, along with policy outputs, change rapidly and unpredictably. For literature testing and extending this model, see Breunig and Koski (2006); Jones, Sulkin and Larson (2003); and Robinson and Caver (2006).

134-5]). More serious are the difficulties involved in sorting out recursive effects, particularly in studies using short time intervals. Still more serious is the problem of non-linearity when interactive effects occur (as when shifts in two agendas combine multiplicatively to impact on a third), or when bivariate relationships are themselves non-linear.<sup>2</sup> The most serious issues, however, concern autocorrelation and non-stationarity in time series. The extent to which this is problematic is, of course, an empirical question, depending on the trends existing in the series. Even then, there is considerable debate about what methods to employ: good surveys are found in Soroka (2002: Appendix A) and Gozenbach and McGavin (1997).

For our purposes, a most important result is that the agendas of the public, the media, and the policy makers are related, as the great bulk of agenda-setting work has found. Moreover, these relationships are reciprocal. The public can respond to the media, but mass opinion about what is important can also drive the media's coverage of issues (Gozenbach, 1992; Brosius and Kepplinger, 1990). The media drive the policy agenda, but they must also report about what politicians are discussing (Walker, 1997). Politicians are somewhat responsive to public opinion, but they can also help set the public agenda (Cohen (1995). Early models showed this recursive pattern (Gozenbach and McGavin: 119).

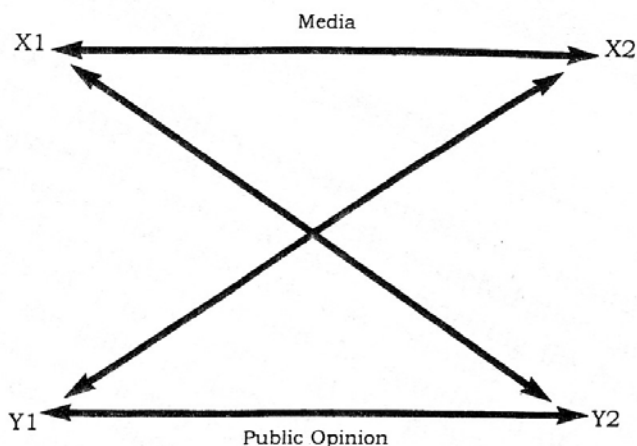


FIG. 9.1. Shaw and McCombs' agenda-setting panel study model.

Later ones elaborated it (Soroka, 2002:11):

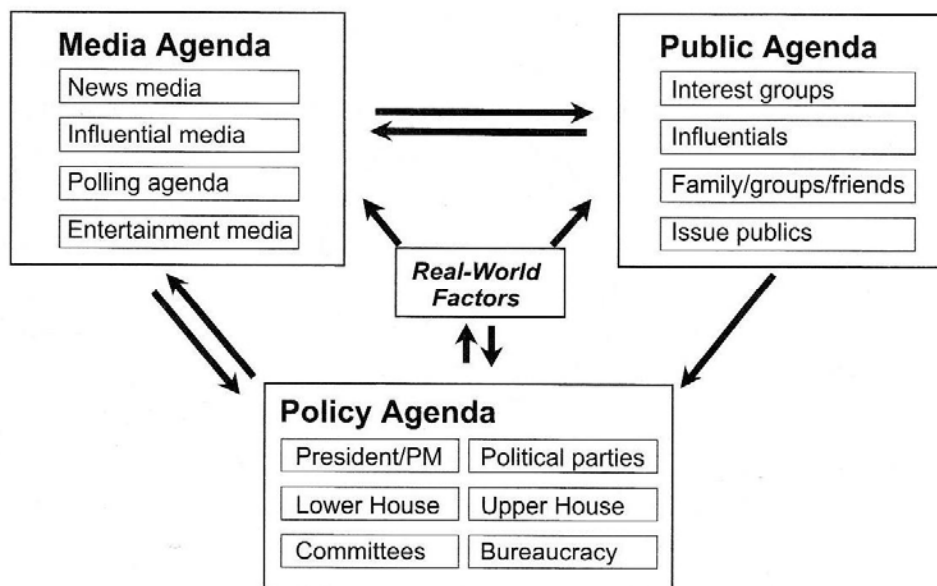
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<sup>2</sup>For a good account of possible non-linear relations between the media and the public agenda, see Brosius and Kepplinger (1992).



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### An expanded model of the agenda-setting process



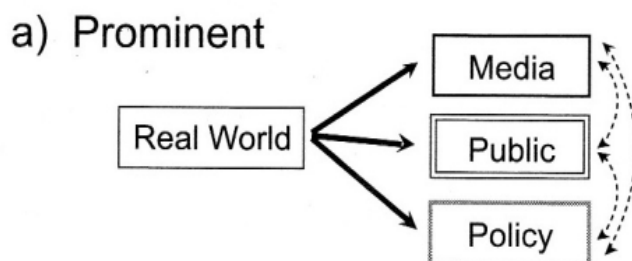
As Gozenbach found in his study of the drug issue (1992: 143),

The press does mirror and immediately set the public agenda, but the public agenda also filters into the press agenda. Secondly, the study reveals the president is following the public agenda, though the president also has strong immediate influence on public opinion. And, finally it suggests the president mirrors and follows the media, in addition to following public opinion. @

A second important general finding is that these effects are quickly perceptible, but their durations are short. Most longitudinal studies show that the impact of the media on the public and politicians occurs quickly - within weeks of a few months at most - but then dissipates quickly too. The three agendas are closely bound together in time. The exceptions are institutional change (Peters and Hogwood, 1985) and policy outputs in a few issue areas, where responses might lag the agendas by five to ten years (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993).

There remains some skepticism among constructivists about the impact of real-world events on agendas. As Hilgartner and Bosk put it (1988: 54): A[a] theory that views social

problems as mere reflections of objective conditions cannot explain why some conditions are defined as problems, commanding a great deal of societal attention, whereas others, equally harmful or dangerous, are not. Yet most studies do find that objective conditions help shape the agendas, and in some cases they outweigh media effects (Pritchard and Bukowicz, 1993). These effects were found to be especially strong in Soroka's prominent issue areas (2002: 74-98), which are both obtrusive and concrete, and where the basic model's setup is (21):



It remains, finally, to consider urban issues. The most thorough exploration of these was done by Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 126-49). Their basic finding is that both media coverage and Congressional hearings on urban issues peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. Action followed, in the form of increasing federal grants to city governments. But the lags were substantial, about five years between the media and the policy agendas, with the media leading (Figure 7.1, p.130), and between three and six years for the hearings-grants relationship (Table B.2, p.273). They analyzed four components of urban issues - infrastructure, social programs and race relations, community development and intergovernmental finance, and environmental concerns - and found that concern with urban issues took the form of a series of waves (134-40). More important, they noted the complexity of the category of urban problems, which forms a vast and amorphous collection of physical and social conditions in modern society. They include housing conditions (overcrowding, decay, abandonment), congestion, crime, racial discrimination, poverty, financial disparities between center city and suburb, mass transportation, and water and sewer quality. (127) The urban issue area may be atypical. Urban issues are diffuse, multi-faceted and sometimes inherently contradictory (transit infrastructure *versus* neighbourhood preservation). As such, urban policies may be policies without publics (May *et al.*, 2005). Like family policy, children's policy and arctic policy, there may be no coherent policy subsystem (or policy community), no overlapping constituencies, and no common objectives or problem definitions. This is perhaps another obstacle to the rise of urban issues on the national policy agenda in Canada.

#### 4. The study

Our study fits into the literature as follows. First, it is long term. We are interested in the whole period between 1867 and 2005. Second, we are searching for the impact of objective factors on the relevant agendas. On the public agenda, we have no data, unfortunately, because opinion polling in Canada did not begin until the 1940s and took a decade to become systematized. So we examine the media and the policy agendas, assuming a tight relationship between them, as the media both drive and report on the discussions of politicians. Unlike the qualitative studies of the emergence of urban issues onto the federal policy agenda, which were

described above, we are not interested in policy outputs in the form of legislation and expenditures. It is important that issues may emerge onto the policy agenda without any action being taken, and it is simply the agenda that concerns us. Finally, we take five-year time periods as our unit of analysis. In part this reflects data shortages. But given the slow moving nature of urban agendas found by Baumgartner and Jones, this allows us to use simple cross correlation functions and equations with only one-period lags.

Our independent variables are population growth, municipal system restructuring, and fiscal stress. Urban population growth figures proved surprisingly difficult to assemble. We selected seven cities - Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary and Vancouver - and gathered population data for their Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) from the decennial censuses which began in 1871.<sup>3</sup> But CMAs were not defined until 1951 (though the 1941 population counts were calculated for the 1951 areas). And early censuses of municipalities in the Western provinces were rather sketchy, often reporting on many small units. As a consequence, we pushed the CMA principle back in time, adding together the populations of contiguous and economically connected municipalities. For Montreal, for instance, the 1871-1931 data include the populations of the Island of Montreal, Île Jésus, and the county of Chambly. Growth rates for 10-year intercensal periods were calculated and populations for the middle year were interpolated, assuming a constant growth rate for the decade, for the whole period until intercensus data began to be gathered in 1956.

Municipal re-structuring is difficult to quantify. Our initial approach was to focus on amendments to the Municipal Act. Each province has a very substantial statute that constitutes the municipal system, delegates specific powers to types of municipalities, prescribes many activities, and specifies financial and governmental arrangements. These statutes run into the hundreds of pages. All provinces have other relevant statutes as well, covering topics as diverse as drainage, the franchise, subsidies, employee retirement provisions, and so on, and the number and scope of these varies considerably. There are also Private Acts, which may establish individual municipalities, change their boundaries, or enact special provisions concerning them, and later there are public acts about particular municipalities. The use of these statutes varies considerably across provinces. But all provinces have one central statute governing municipalities, and changes in these were to be our indicator of re-structuring, or interference in the provincial-municipal system. We chose to measure this in Ontario, the largest province, and New Brunswick, an equally old albeit much smaller province. For every year we measured the number of pages of amendments to the two municipal acts, and expressed this as a percentage of the total number of pages of public statutes in the two provinces. These figures were assembled into five-year periods. Unfortunately, and unlike the case in New Brunswick, we believe that most major changes to municipal structure in Ontario are accomplished through changes to other

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<sup>3</sup>A CMA is formed by one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a large urban area (known as the urban core). The census population count of the urban core is at least 10,000 to form a census agglomeration and 100,000 to form a census metropolitan area. To be included in the CMA or CA, other adjacent municipalities must have a high degree of integration with the central urban area, as measured by commuting flows derived from census place of work data. (Canada, Statistics Canada, 2001).

acts, while the Municipal Act governs the functioning of the system. Without further research, we cannot confirm that there is a close correlation between municipal restructuring in Ontario and changes to the Municipal Act. So our proxy for municipal restructuring consists of changes to the City of Toronto Act (and to the Metro Toronto Act). In any case, as will be seen, neither of these variables is much associated with the place of municipalities on the federal policy agenda.

Financial data posed problems. There is no centralized repository of municipal finance data in Canada, and even the provincial governments' holdings are weak and inconsistent. For Ontario we tried to track total tax revenues, debt, debt charges and sinking fund deposits, but every series petered out or underwent changes in definition. So we have had to use summary data, with two measures that can indicate fiscal stress - municipal governments' gross general expenditure on goods and services and their investment in fixed capital (Urquhart, 1993, Table 1.3; Canada, 1988, Table 46; Canada, Statistics Canada, n.d., Table#380-0022). The latter data are available only for the 1926-2005 period.

As for the dependent variable, we have two basic agenda indicators. On the assumption that media both drives and follows the political agenda, we gathered data on both of these. For the media, we chose to focus on the *Globe and Mail*. It is a Toronto-based newspaper, but has always covered national and international news, and it has been published continuously over our time period. We counted the number of pages in which appeared the term 'municipalities' over our five-year periods, on both the front page and in the whole front section, which covers news. We also coded the coverage of 14 other topics - war, crime, railways, labour, and so on - and so we can express the coverage of municipalities in proportional terms. As well, we repeated the count of 'municipalities' for the entire paper, for both the *New York Times* and the *Times* of London. There is some evidence (Soroka, 2002: 108-13) that the former newspaper has influenced Canadian agendas in recent years, and the same may be expected for the latter paper in the post-colonial period.

For the >public= side of the national agenda, we have two measures. First, there is the Address from the Throne. This is read at the opening of each session of Parliament (which need not occur regularly or even annually), and it lays out the government=s priorities for action in the coming session. We coded each speech for the top three priorities and also for references to municipal issues, such as grants, housing, urban development, and so on. This produced rather thin results, so we turned to Hansard, the record of debate in the House of Commons. Some scholars have used the Index to Hansard in similar research (Howlett, 1997; Tremblay, 1998), but we found the Index to be very unreliable (see also Soroka, 2002: 67). So we turned to Question Period. In oral questions, which occur every sitting day (except towards the beginning of our period), members of the Opposition parties raise issues and, normally, criticize the government=s performance in these important areas. We looked for questions about municipalities and urban issues more broadly, sampling the middle year of each of our five-year periods. Beginning on the first Monday sitting, two weeks after the start of each session, we recorded the number of questions about our issue that were posed in every other question period for a total of 10 question periods. Since we also recorded information about the total number of questions, we are able to take the municipal questions as a percentage of all questions posed.

## 5. Analysis

The basic data are displayed in Appendix I. We focus on these as our core variables. The independent variables are the percentage change in the population of seven major cities, the percentage change in total spending by municipalities, and the proportion of the pages in the Public Statutes of Ontario which were changes to the Municipal Act. The dependent variables that we settled on are mentions of municipal issues in the Throne speeches, the proportion of all House of Commons questions that concerned municipalities, and the proportion of front pages of the *Globe and Mail* that contained some mention of municipalities. The basic emphasis is on municipalities, not “urban” issues as such, for these are vaguely defined. We did, however, retain one “urban” composite variable, which is the proportion of front pages of the *Globe and Mail* that mentioned either housing or poverty. These are generally urban issues, and they correlate closely. We also experimented with mentions of immigration, but since most early immigrants to Canada settled on farms this was not specifically an urban issue until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We also experimented with mentions of “crime,” but there were only weak correlations with housing and poverty, so it was dropped.

As the table in Appendix II shows, there is no problem of multicollinearity among the independent variables. None is significantly related to any others. On the other hand, as shown in Appendix III, the dependent variables are closely related, though not perfectly so.

The basic regression results are displayed in Table 1. The results are interesting and unexpected. First, there is no relationship between provincial-municipal restructuring (at least as represented by Ontario) and any of the dependent variables measuring the prominence of municipal issues on the federal policy agenda. This is some testimony to the separation of the agendas between the two levels of government. Secondly, there are significant relationships between urban population change and all four dependent variables. However, these are in the opposite direction than that specified in our original hypothesis: faster population growth is associated with less attention to municipal issues at the federal level. It is not immediately obvious why this should be the case. Third, there are significant relationships between changes

in municipal expenditures and the rise of municipal issues on the federal agenda. Once more, however, the direction of the relationship is unexpected, because rising expenditures are associated with greater municipal prominence. It appears that municipal fiscal distress does not propel municipal issues onto the federal agenda. Finally, despite the unexpected direction of the

Table 1: Basic Regression Models

Dependent Variables  
(unstandardized regression coefficients)

	Throne Speech Mentions	Proportion of Questions - Municipal	Proportion of G&M Front Pages Municipalities	Proportion of G&M Front pages Housing or Poverty
Constant	4.01	1.89**	1.23**	2.87**
% change in urban population	-.29*	-.09***	-.04*	-.14**
% change in municipal spending	.06	.02*	.01*	.06***
% of Acts that are the Municipal Act	1.47	.09	.09	.11
F	3.27*	5.64**	3.83*	11.01***
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)	.21	.36	.26	.57

\* P < .05

\*\* p < .01

\*\*\* p < .001

main results, the three independent variables do explain a significant amount of variation in our measures of the prominence of municipal issues on the federal policy agenda.

One explanation for the unexpected signs on population growth and spending might be that our five-year time periods are too short to capture their longer term impacts. So the equations were run with each of these factors lagged one and two periods. This produced little effect. In examining questions in the House of Commons, for example, percentage increase in population remained negative and significant at the .05 level, while percentage change in spending remained positive and very nearly significant. All the lagged versions of these variables were not significant. In fact, in no case were any of the lagged independent variables

significant (and in no case did the signs reverse).

We also experimented with sectioning the data by time periods. We divided the sample into pre-1945 and post-1945 periods. Most of these regressions, run with only spending and population growth rates as predictors, produced insignificant results, as the numbers of cases were very small. But the signs did not change direction, with one exception. This concerned mentions in Throne speeches. Before 1946, there was a negative and significant coefficient on municipal spending. What this reflects is the increasing attention paid to municipalities by the federal government during WWI and the Great Depression, when Throne speeches mentioned the introduction of housing and social assistance schemes. But this effect did not carry over into questions posed in the House of Commons during the pre-1946 period.

One common problem in time-series analysis, of course, is autocorrelation. We approached this in two ways. First, we included a trend variable in the main equations. The results of this are reported in Table 2. As might be expected given the peaks in all variables during the latter part of our period – about 1950-1980 – the trend variable is significant in all models, except that concerning Questions in the House of Commons. It sops up a lot of variance, and renders our explanatory factors insignificant in most of the models. But some results remain. Amendments to the Ontario Municipal Act continue to be insignificant in all regressions. The sign on population growth continues to be negative, consistently, and the variable is significant in the Question Period equation. And the spending variable remains positive, and it is significantly associated with the urban issues of housing and poverty.

Table 2: Regression Models Including a Trend Variable

	Throne Speech Mentions	Proportion of Questions - Municipal	Proportion of G&M Front Pages Municipalities	Proportion of G&M Front pages Housing or Poverty
Constant	-6.4	1.08	-.30	-1.47
% change in urban population	-.003	-.07*	-.002	-.03
% change in municipal spending	-.001	.01	.004	.03**
% of Acts pages that are the Municipal Act	1.29	.08	.13	.21
Time Period	.56**	.04	.08**	.23***
F	5.57**	4.59**	6.45**	23.34***
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)	.42	.36	.48	.79

\*  $P < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Second, we ran the regressions in the form of an Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ADL) model. This simply models the value of the dependent variable as a function of previous values of itself and of current and lagged values of the independent variables. This produced results that were largely insignificant, except that one model was a good predictor of activity in Question Period ( $R^2_{adj} = .41$ ) with both population growth and change in municipal spending being highly significant (with a negative and positive sign respectively, as before).

What is to be made of these mixed results? Our conclusion is essentially an historical one. There is no consistent relationship between the explanatory factors that we have examined and our measures of the presence of municipal issues on the federal policy agenda. Instead, it is a different factor – or complex of causes – that causes the rise on the agenda of municipal issues, as we have measured them.

Consider municipal issues raised in Speeches from the Throne, which indicate intended federal government action. (See Appendix IV.A.) This measure was essentially flat in the long period running until 1920; there were no real federal initiatives in the municipal field. During the Depression of the 1930s, there was a rise, corresponding to a very sharp drop in municipal spending growth, and insolvency in many municipalities. Increases in the post-WWII period had to do with housing initiatives and measures to combat unemployment. This was at a time when the population of metropolitan areas was growing very quickly, along with municipal spending, but even after these increases tapered off in the 1970s, the federal initiatives surged, largely having to do with the creation of the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. But this spike in an intergovernmental approach to urban issues fell off sharply. Then there was a rapid rise in federal government attention in the last two periods studied, and especially in 2001-2005. This coincided with very substantial declines in municipal spending growth rates (from around 80% per five-year period between 1951 and 1980 to 11% in the 1996-2000 period). It also coincided with some dramatic municipal restructuring which caused a lot of unrest in Ontario, a core base of support for the governing federal Liberal Party.

Issues raised in Question Period are on the federal agenda, whether the government wishes it or not. (See Appendix IV.B.) The proportion of all questions that involve municipalities moves almost randomly, though there is a strong negative correlation ( $-.51$ ) with the population growth rate (and this holds up when population growth is lagged up to several periods). Until after WWI, there seems to be no relationship between questions posed and government plans as revealed in Throne Speeches, but then there is a fairly close relationship, with questions apparently leading throne Speech announcements except for the late 1950s and early 1960s (see Appendix IV.B.i). There is a clear negative relationship between levels of questioning in the House and population growth rates, and a positive one between questions and spending rates (except during the Depression and at the very end of our period).

News coverage of municipalities roughly tracks population and spending growth rates until the Depression, when it leaps while they both fall precipitously. (See Appendix IV.C.) Then the pattern resumes until 1960, when population growth rates drop. But spending rates and coverage both remain high until about 1975. This suggests that the way the factors affect the



agenda change over time. During the Depression, the media covered fiscal distress among municipalities, while in most of the post-war period the media reported on how municipalities were using their abundant revenues. After the late 1970s, both media coverage and spending fall, but coverage picks up sharply in the 1990s, while spending and population growth rates both fall. This rise is coincident with big changes to the municipal structure in Ontario.

There are finally the measures of media coverage of urban pathologies – housing problems and poverty. (See Appendix IV.D.) There was a stable and not insubstantial concern with these issues around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through to the 1920s. Unlike other indicators of the municipal presence on the federal agenda, this coverage did not leap very sharply in the Depression. The surge came in the post-WWII period, and very dramatically in the late 1960s. This enormous increase reflects new housing programs, slum clearance initiatives, and the War on Poverty, both in the United States and Canada. In this period, coverage of these pathologies tracked municipal spending growth and also population growth (with some delay). But coverage then fell off sharply, and did not recover towards the end of our period. Concern with municipal issues in the media rose steadily from 1985 until 2000, but this was not true of the media's attention to urban problems.

## 6. Conclusion

Our conclusion, for now, is that there is no simple explanation for the rise of municipal issues onto the federal agenda in Canada. There is no 'silver bullet' here.

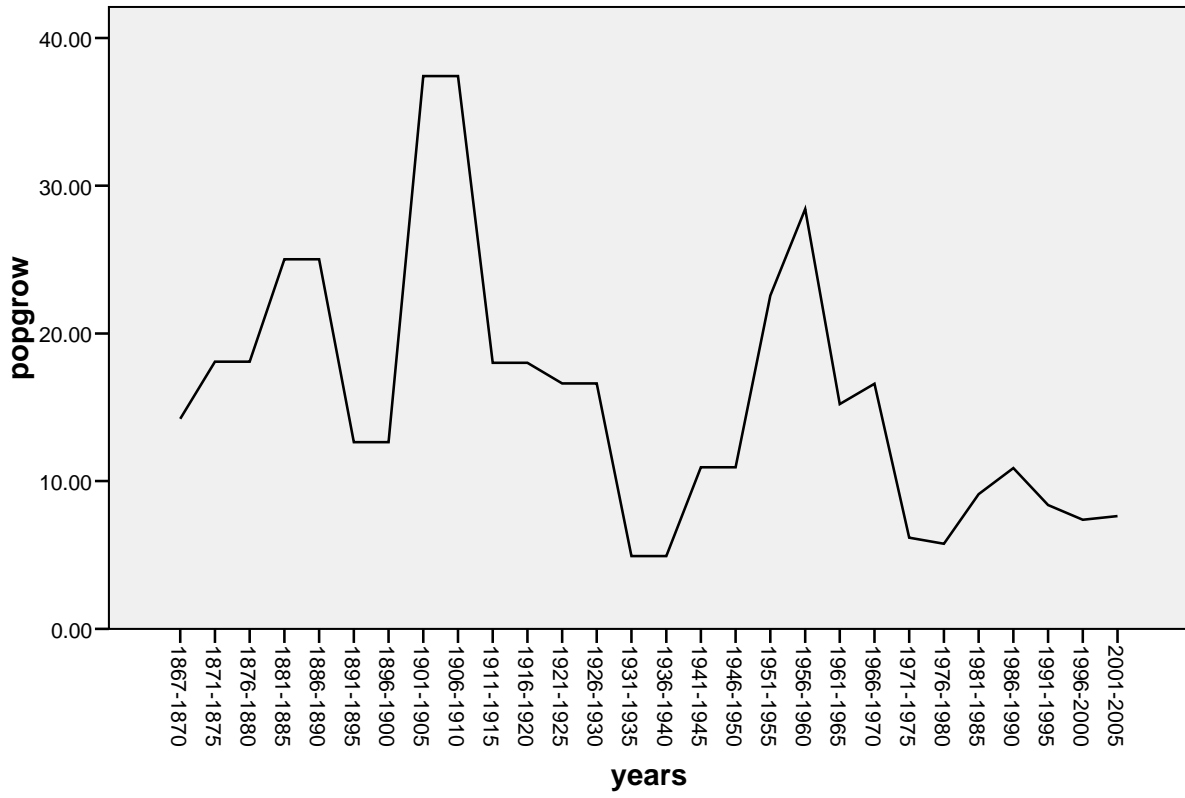
Our three explanatory factors seem to come into play at different times. It appears that provincial-municipal restructuring is strongly associated with the rise of the urban agenda, for example, but only in very recent times, at the end of our period. Otherwise it is consistently unrelated with our measures of agenda prominence. And individual factors play differently at different times. In the 1930s, fiscal distress clearly drove municipal issues to national attention; however the spikes visible in municipal prominence in the post-WWII period, by any measure, were associated with very rapid increases in municipal spending. And in the early part of our period, when spending was under pressure, municipal restructuring was taking place, and the population was surging, municipal issues failed to reach much prominence at all: the federal government, and the country, were preoccupied with railways and war, and the government could manage to do nothing on the municipal file.

On the other hand, it seems that some factors do not play as expected. For the most part, municipal restructuring (at least as represented by Ontario) does not filter up to Ottawa. More important, the municipal agenda seems surprising unrelated to population increases. Indeed, rising urban populations are consistently not associated or negatively associated with our agenda measures, even with many lags. On the other hand, critics might claim that this varies over time. In early periods, immigrants to cities and the concomitant problems could simply be neglected, while the latest waves of immigrants, though representing much smaller rates of increase, actually have managed to raise municipal issues on the agenda because they tend to be composed of visible minorities and the integration problems are now greater than they were.

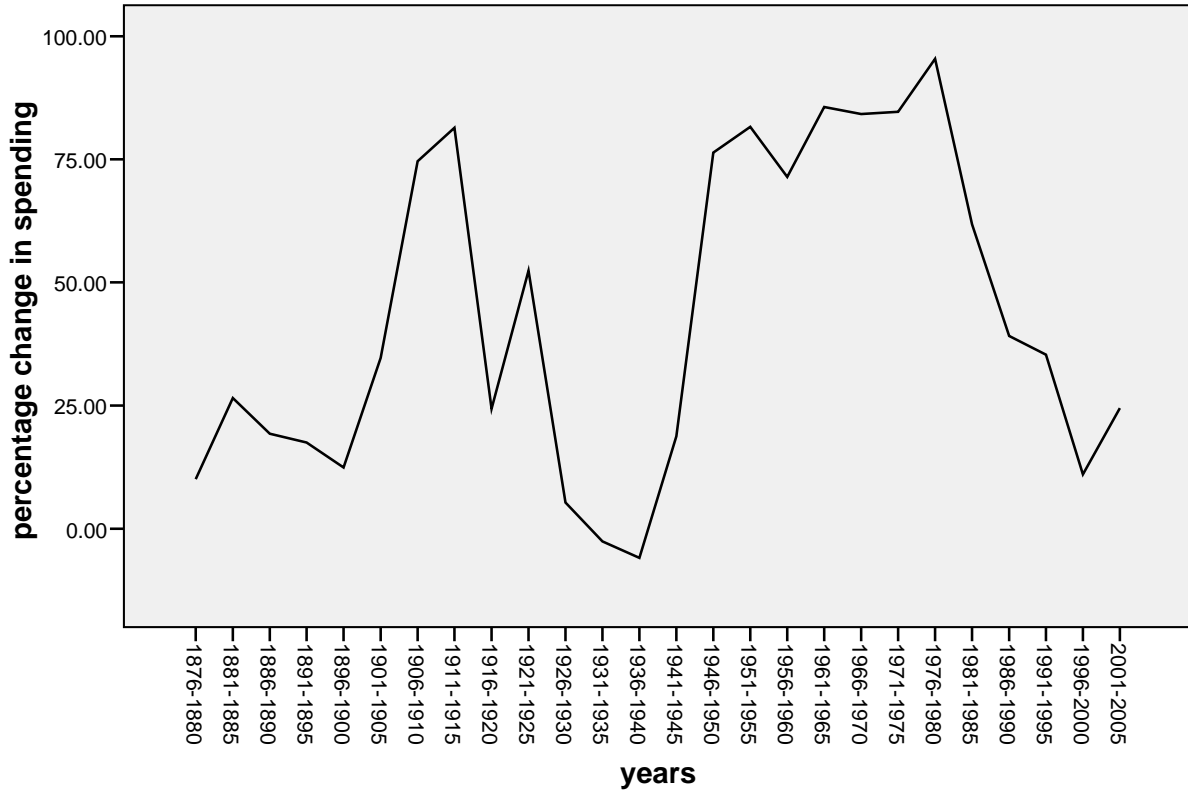
There is further work to do. But our conclusion now is that over the long term history wins out. Different causal factors and different complexes of them act in different periods to propel municipal issues onto the national agenda. Times change.

Appendix I: Data

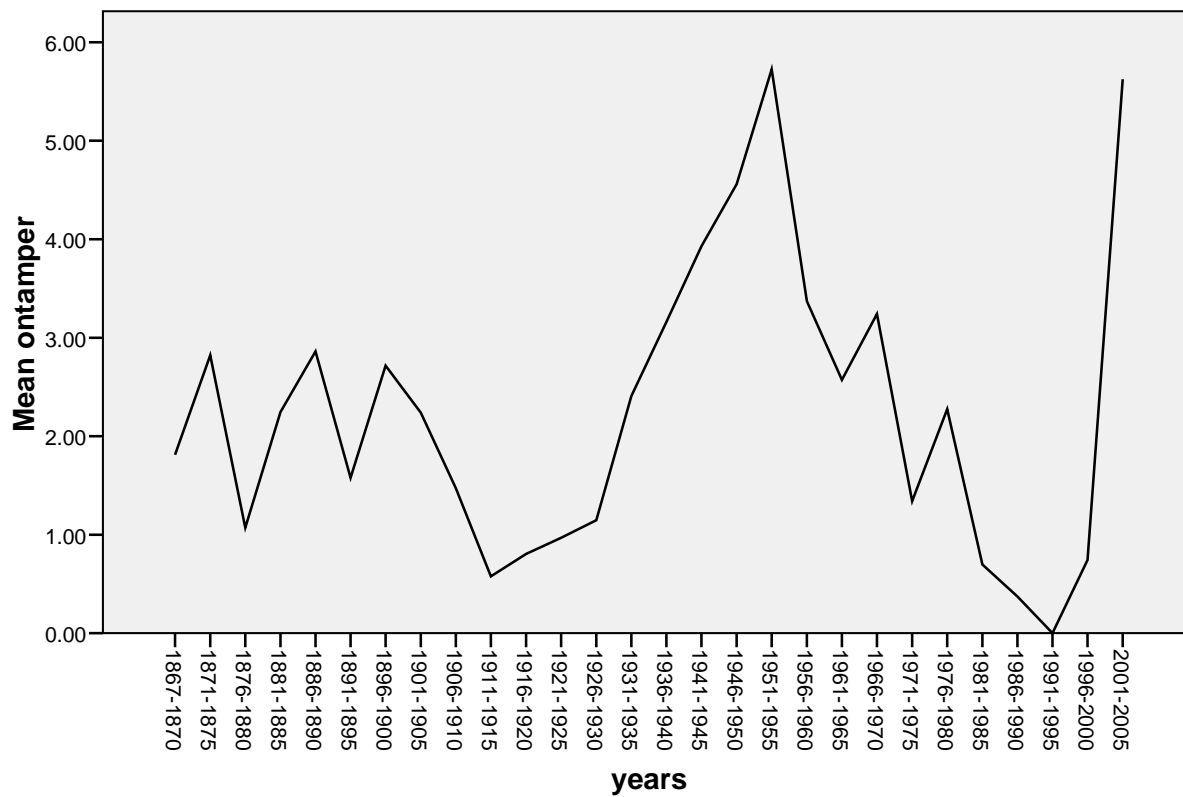
Percentage change in population in seven metropolitan centres



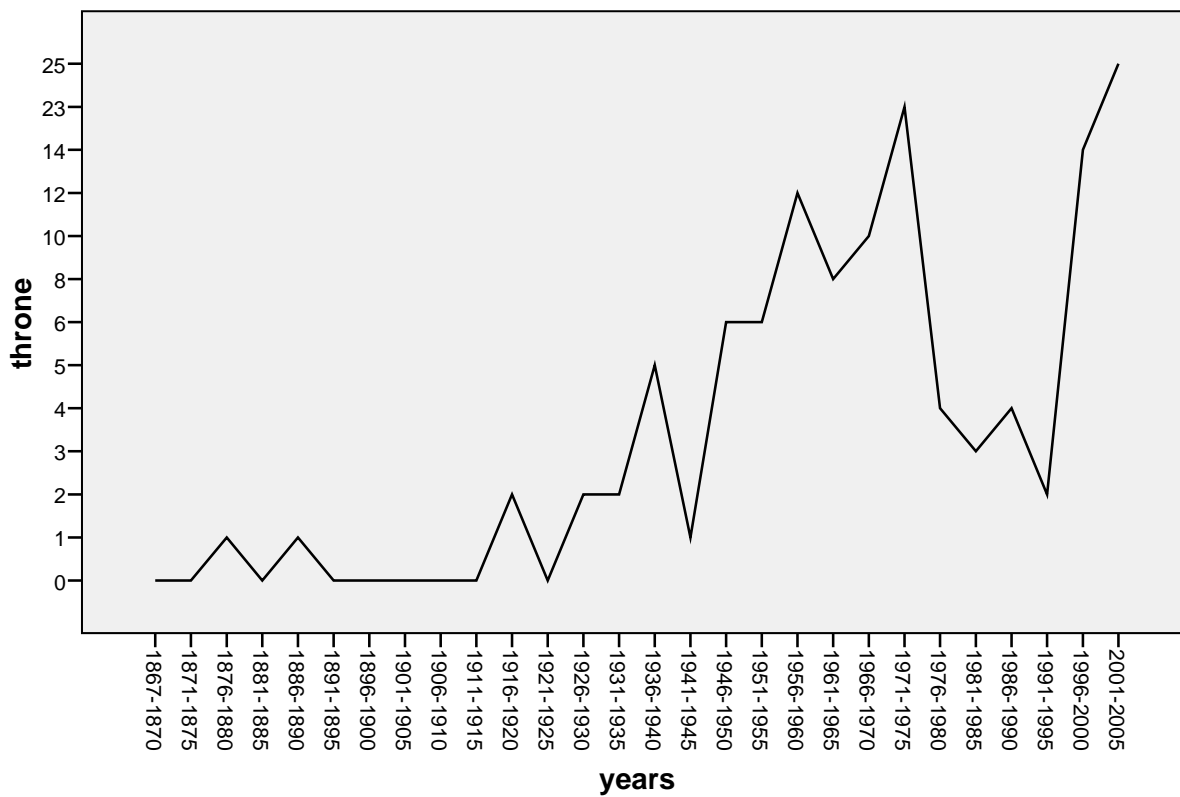
### Percentage change in municipal government spending



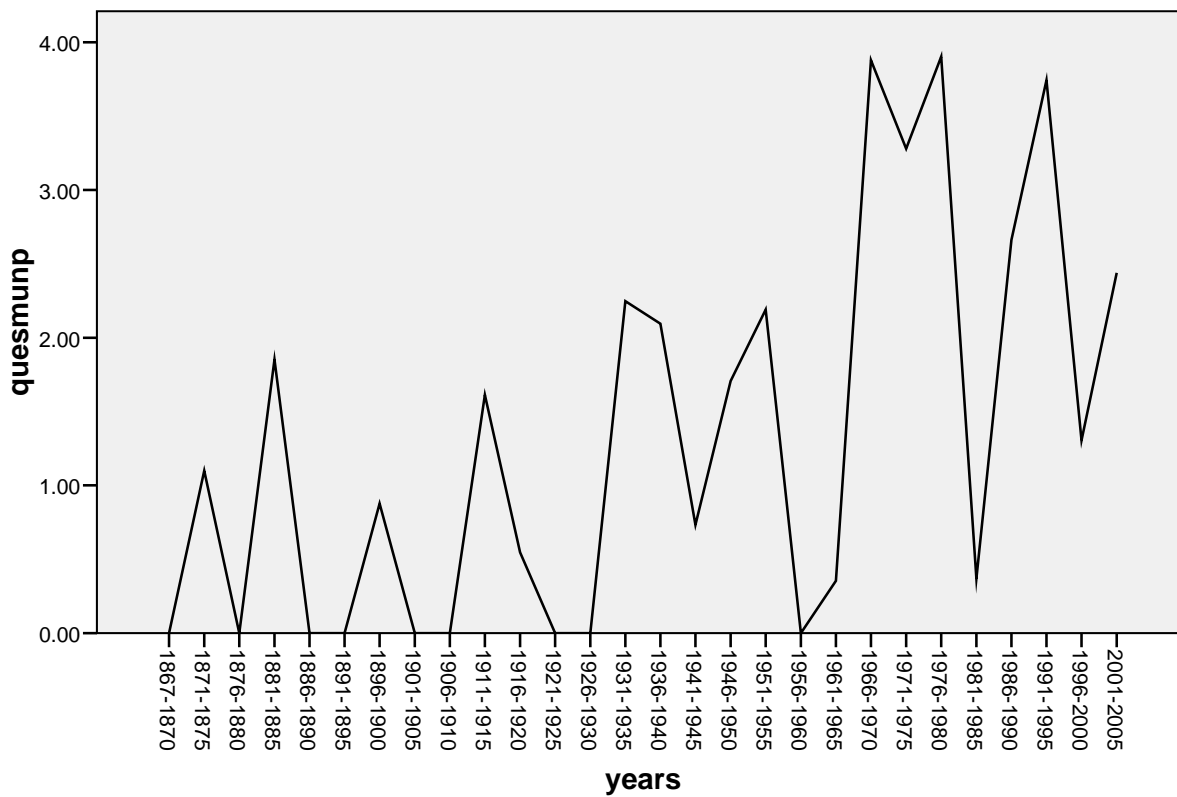
### Percentage of pages of Ontario public acts that are changes to the Municipal Act



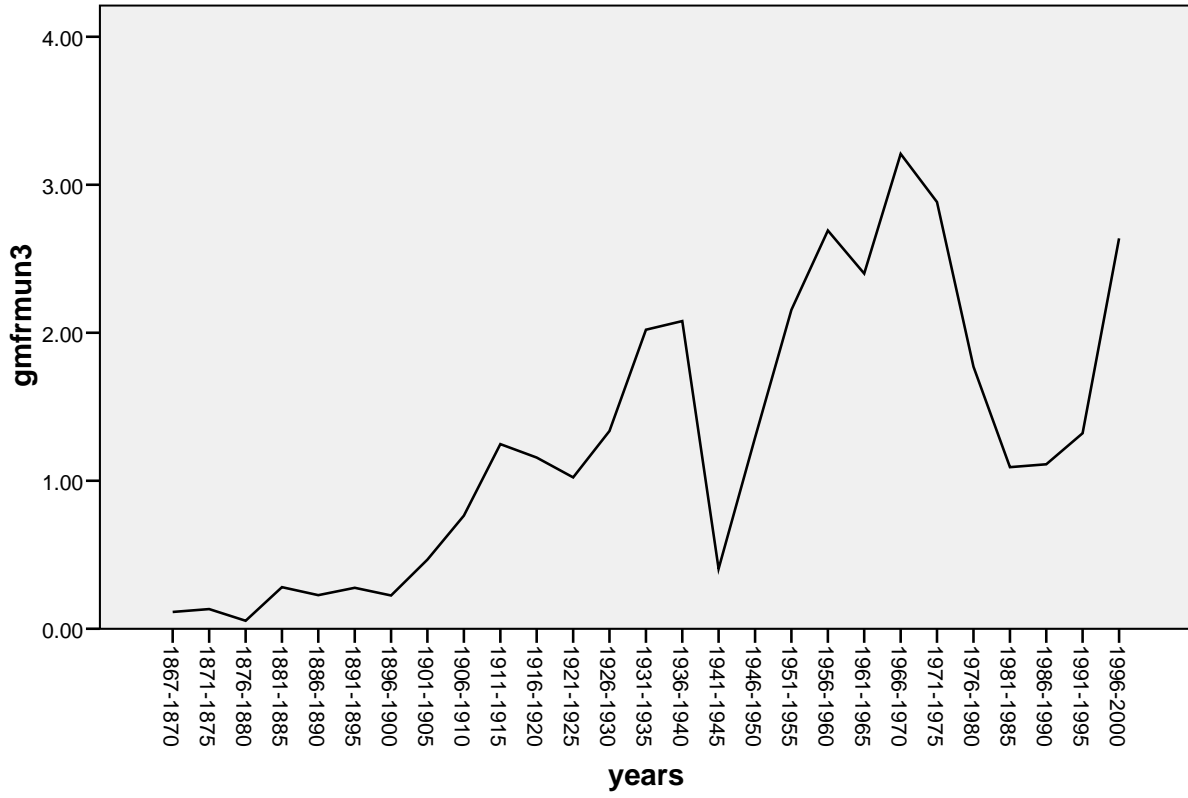
### Number of mentions of municipalities in Throne speeches



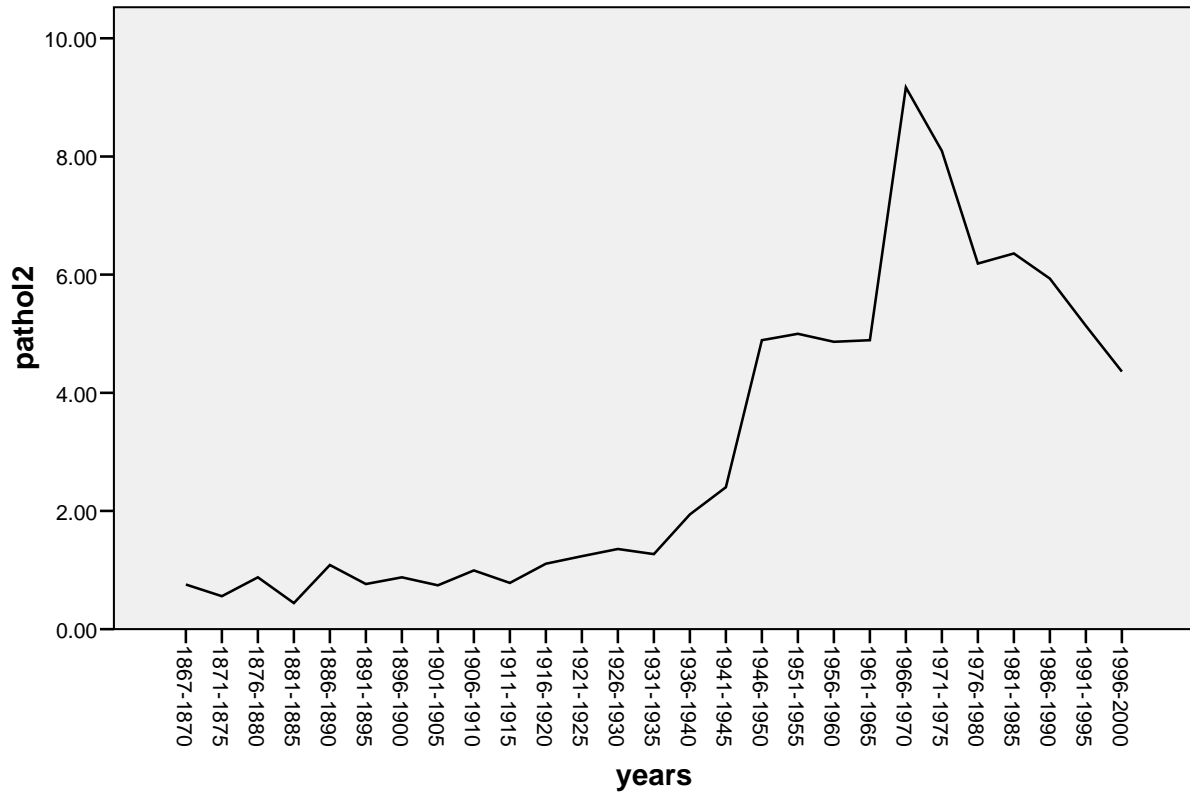
### Percentage of questions in the House of Commons that concern municipalities



### Proportion of Globe and Mail front pages that contain "municipalities"



### Proportion of Globe and Mail front pages that contain "housing" or "poverty"





## Appendix II: Intercorrelations between the independent variables

### Correlations

		popgrow	percentage change in spending	ontamper
popgrow	Pearson Correlation	1	.177	.047
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.387	.811
	N	28	26	28
percentage change in spending	Pearson Correlation	.177	1	.116
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.387		.573
	N	26	26	26
ontamper	Pearson Correlation	.047	.116	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.811	.573	
	N	28	26	28

### Appendix III: Intercorrelations between the dependent variables

#### Correlations

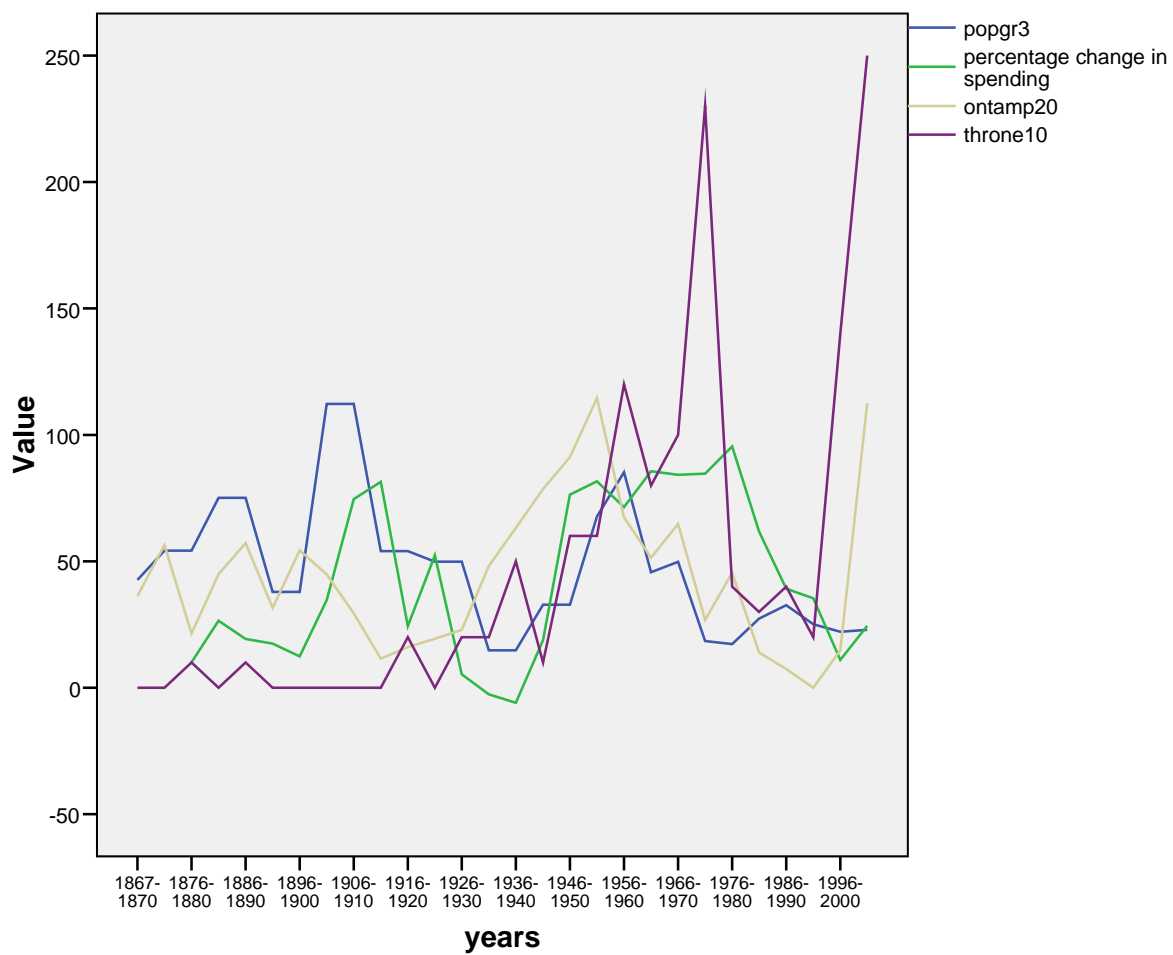
		throne	quesmunp	gmfrmun3	pathol2
throne	Pearson Correlation	1	.413(*)	.811(**)	.735(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.029	.000	.000
	N	28	28	27	27
quesmunp	Pearson Correlation	.413(*)	1	.518(**)	.644(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.029		.006	.000
	N	28	28	27	27
gmfrmun3	Pearson Correlation	.811(**)	.518(**)	1	.736(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.006		.000
	N	27	27	27	27
pathol2	Pearson Correlation	.735(**)	.644(**)	.736(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	27	27	27	27

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

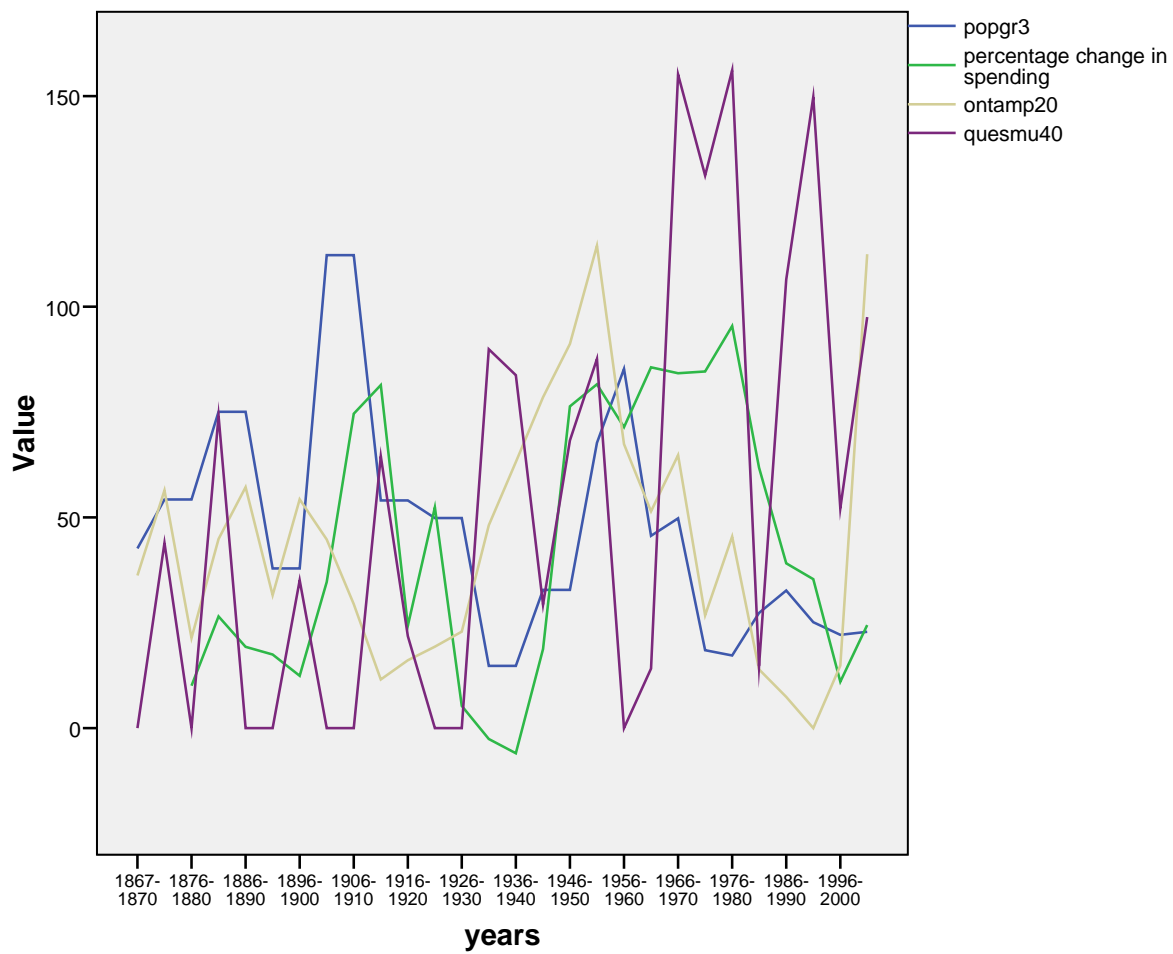
\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## Appendix IV: Graphs of independent variables with each of the dependent variables

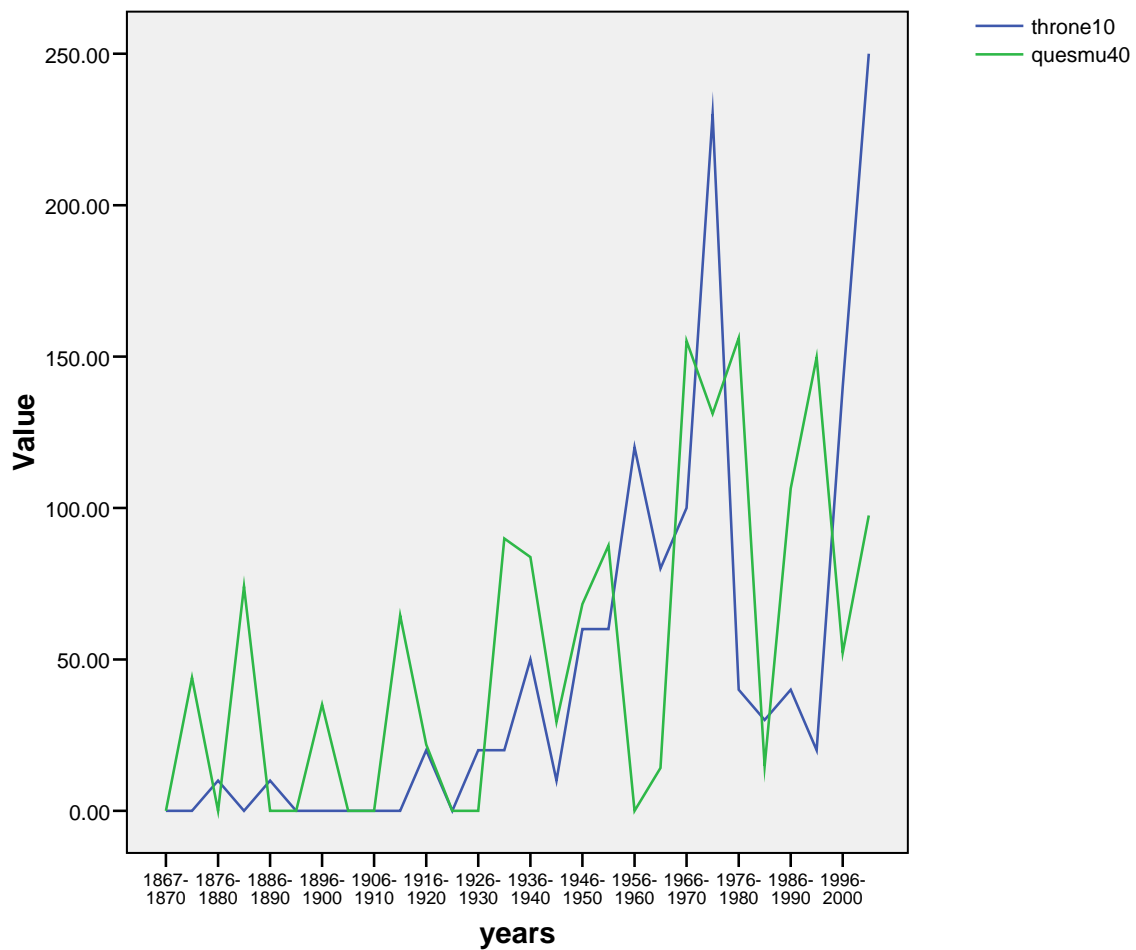
### A. Throne speech mentions



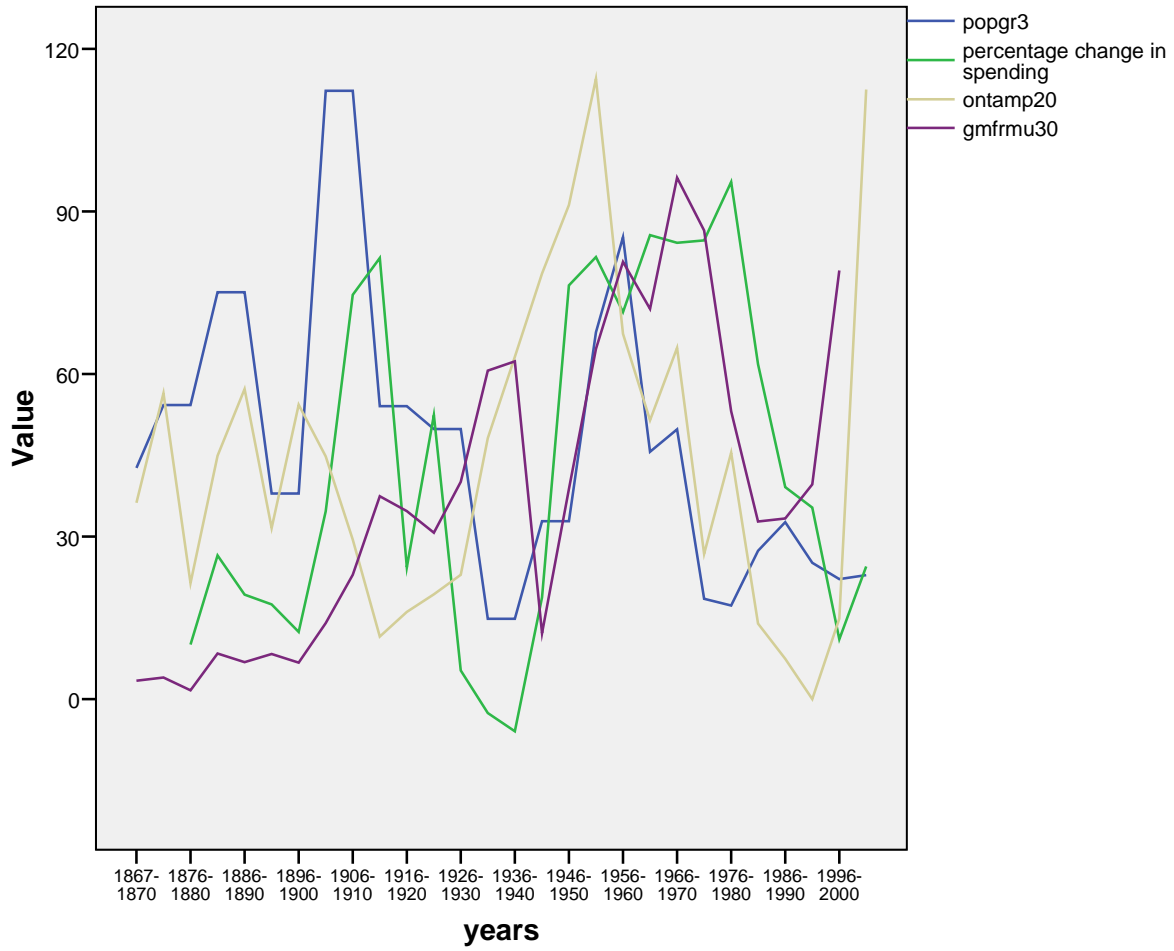
## B. Questions in the House of Commons



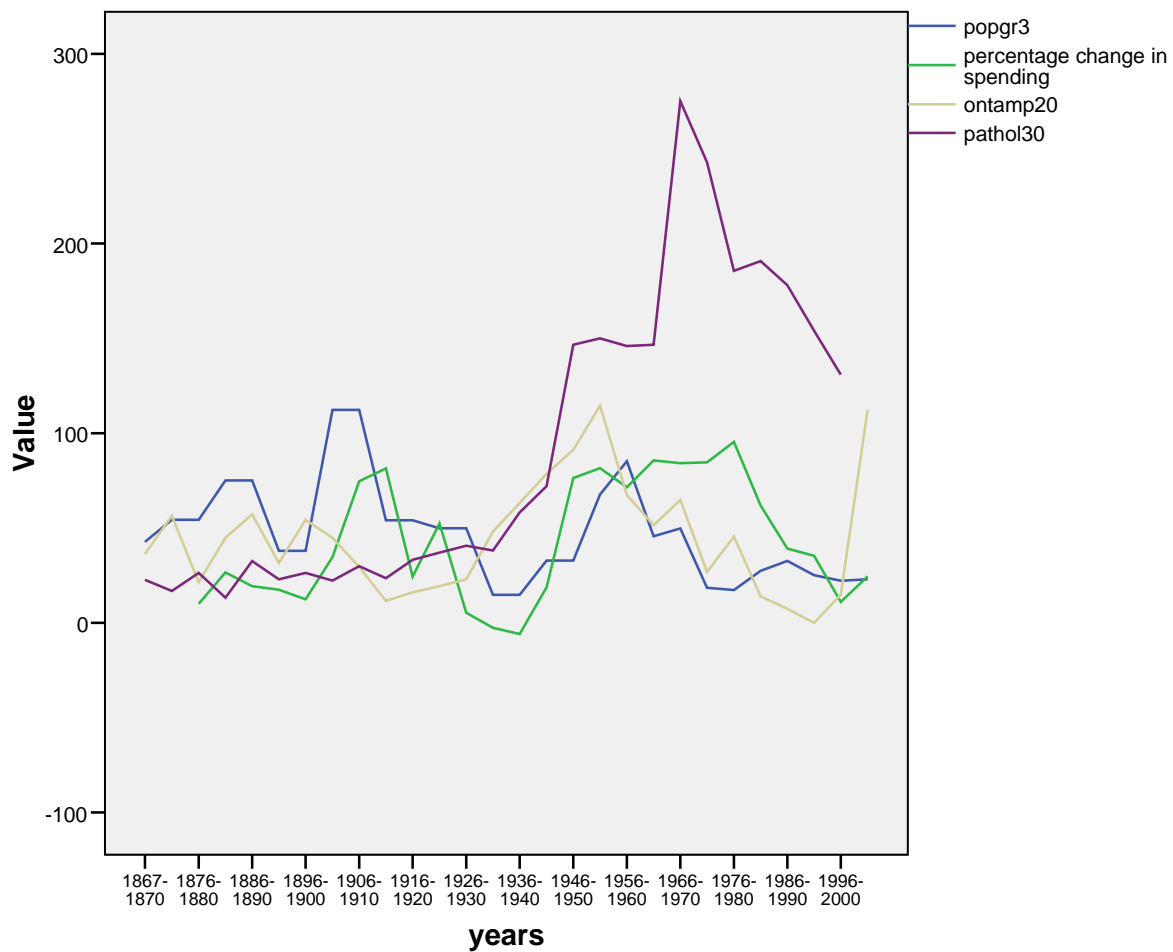
## B.i. Throne Speech mentions and questions in the House of Commons



C. Proportion of Globe and Mail front pages containing “municipalities”



## D. Proportion of Globe and Mail front pages mentioning “housing” or “poverty”



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