Comparing Local Electoral Competition

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Canadian Political Science Association
Edmonton, June 2012

Our objective today is to present some initial reflections about—or, more precisely, to explore—a recurrent topic in studies on local politics but relatively unexplored: the low level of electoral competition in this arena and the effects this has on local political life.

The incumbency advantage – Quebec 2009 municipal elections

	Nbre of candidates	Incumbent candidates	Reelected incumbent candidates	% of reelected incumbents	% of elected new candidates
Montréal	392	63	47	75	28
Québec	94	28	15	54	54
Laval	58	18	18	100	0
Gatineau	43	12	10	83	44
Longueuil	53	22	15	68	42
Sherbrooke	70	16	16	100	0
Saguenay	46	16	15	94	27
Lévis	33	10	9	90	40
Trois-Rivières	33	16	12	75	25

The average of reelection rate: 90,4%

Source: adapted from Collin (2011).

2

A number of indicators can be used to measure the level of electoral competition. One of these is the incumbents' re-election rate. The slide shows the example of the 2009 Québec municipal election results in cities of over 100,000 inhabitants. We see that the re-election rate is high, averaging around 90.4%. The reign of certain local elected officials is also an indicator of electoral competition. When it is especially long, we can talk about a political monopoly, defined as the same team occupying positions of power for more than 10 years, with a strong ability to resist the political opposition (Trounstine, 2006). In the 9 cities shown here, the city of Laval is an example of a political monopoly, illustrating the low level of electoral competition (Bherer, 2011).

Voter Turnout – Quebec 2009 Municipal Elections

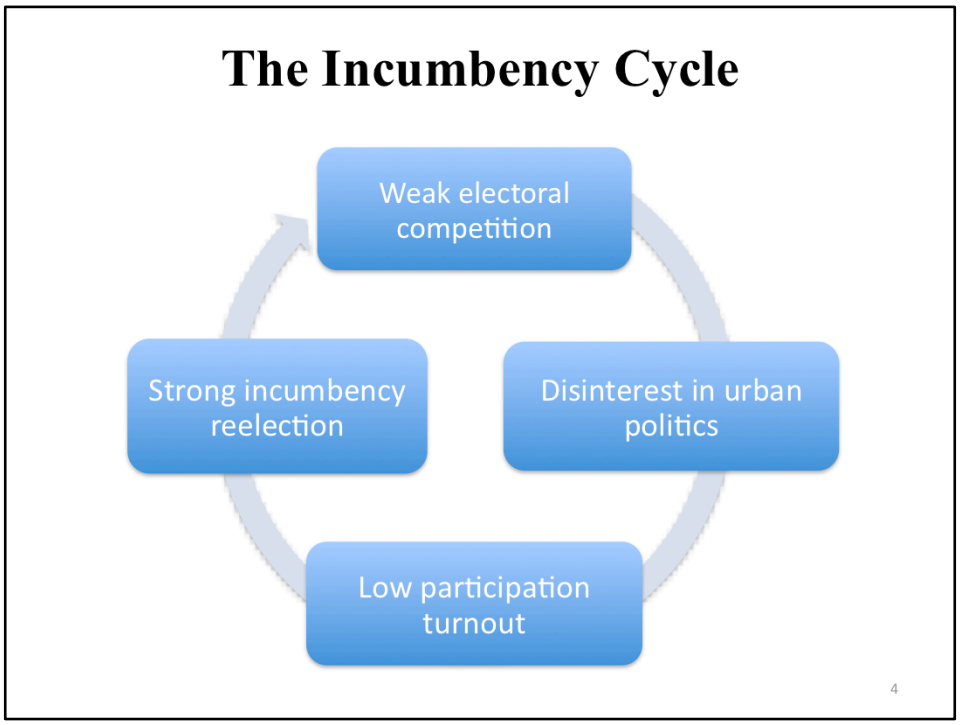
	Population Size	Participation
Montréal	1 640 565	39,4%
Québec	498 062	49,04
Laval	377 332	35,7%
Gatineau	247 139	38,5%
Longueuil	230 949	38,9%
Sherbrooke	149 495	44,6%
Saguenay	144 806	51,5%
Lévis	133 352	Only one candidate
Trois-Rivières	128 082	46,4

Based on the vote for the mayor candidates

Source: adapted from Collin (2011).

3

One of the effects of a low level of electoral competition is lower voter turnout compared with other political levels. The possible reasons for this lower municipal participation are different from those usually found at higher political levels (Caren, 2007). Indeed, at the municipal level, what seems to count in voters deciding to go to the polls is not so much voters' individual profiles (that is, the group of socio-demographic factors that characterize the individual) as the importance of the local context. For example, the most important determinants for voting at the national level, that is, number of years of schooling and income do not apply at the local level, as a large proportion of voters with high education and/or income levels do not vote. Structural reasons linked to the functioning and organization of local politics are said to more readily explain low voter turnout, especially the limited range of political choices (Wood, 2002; Trounstine, 2006).



This relationship between political choices and voter turnout can be understood as follows. We can think of it as a self-sustaining cycle. First, weak electoral competition is said to deprive voters of relevant information about local public policies. It is then difficult for them to judge the incumbents' performance. This leads to a disinterest in local politics and, consequently, low voter turnout (Berry et Howell, 2007; Trounstine, 2010) . American studies show that it is the stakeholders most concerned by local decisions that vote the most (Oliver et Shang, 2007). Depending on the context, these stakeholders may vary, but a good example is homeowners (Fischell, 2005) In such a context, the re-election rate is high: low voter turnout is in fact said to favour the re-election of incumbents.

This cycle means that if we want to do something to increase people's interest in local politics, the range of people's political choices offered is where we need to intervene. In such a context, it is important to understand how (low) electoral competition develops at the municipal level. Why are there limited political choices? These questions prompt us to look at the types of candidates and, especially, the role of political parties. How do political parties and candidates influence political choices? Do they enhance political competition? What are their practices in terms of recruitment?

The objective of our presentation is an exploratory one. We are attempting to define an analytical framework that will allow us to better understand the local party phenomenon in Canada: what kind of theory should we develop in order to understand the role of local Canadian political parties in electoral competition?

Plan

- The role of political party at the local level: a litterature review
- The role of political party at the local level: The Canadian Case

5

And to do this, we will first look at the few studies that exist on local political parties elsewhere in the world. We will see that there are two approaches to this topic. We will then ask some questions about the practices of local political parties in Canada in order to come up with some hypothesis to use to study this phenomenon in Canada and thus better understand the rules of local political competition.
We should mention that our work will mainly focus on cities of over 100,000 inhabitants, even though at some points in our presentation we will also include local political parties in all kinds of localities.

Local Political parties

Two approaches to local political parties

- **1st approach**: Local political parties allow for the creation of a strictly local political agenda (especially in Europe).
- **2nd approach**: Local political parties are not viable because the local political agenda is limited (especially in the United States).

6

We will now explain each of these two approaches to local political parties and then describe the resulting political competition issues that arise in each case.

Local Political Parties

Approach 1 – A Positive View

- Local parties have traditionally been branches of national parties.

Literature review:

- The hypothesis of the nationalization of local politics
- The hypothesis of second-order elections

7

In the first approach, the interest in local political parties is part of a general reflection about the political arenas occupied by national parties. Studies have shown that since 1945 national political parties have gradually occupied the field of local politics by creating local branches to run in municipal elections (Kjaer & Elkit, 2010). This is called the nationalization of local elections, which is a process whereby national parties enter the local arena and transform the local dynamics so that it comes to reflect national political issues rather than local ones (Rokkan, 1966). Similar to this is the hypothesis that the nationalization of local elections turns the latter into second-order elections, which is to say that they essentially serve to allow voters to sanction (or not sanction) the government in power at the national level. According to this approach, if an opposition party is relatively successful in the local polls, it means that voters disapprove of the decisions of the majority (or coalition) party in power at the national level.

Local Political Parties

A new phenomenon:

- Purely local political parties are a relatively recent phenomenon that is on the rise in several European countries (Belgium, England, etc.).
- Definition of a purely local political party: a political party with no formal ties to national parties (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010).

8

The nationalization of local elections appears however to have been declining in recent years due to a growing phenomenon in several European countries: the running of local political parties in local elections (Reiser and Holtman, 2008) .
But the reality is of course more complex, as we will see.
Before we look at the hypotheses that researchers have proposed about this growing phenomenon, we will show how the second approach differs from the first.

Local Political Parties

Approach 2 - A Negative View

- *Dominant hypothesis*: The apolitism of municipal issues does not favour the creation of an electoral market (Paul Peterson, *City Limits*).
- Reformist legacy: There should be no partisanship at the local level.

9

In the United States, researchers are studying not so much the presence of national parties at the local level (which we will come back to) as the non-relevance of political parties at the local level. According to this point of view, which is well expressed in Paul Peterson's seminal work (1981), it is impossible to think of a political party being viable at the local level. Peterson says that there is no market for local political ideas because local governments' areas of responsibility (in the United States) are technical in nature. This is due to the fact that local public policies are not redistributive, but allocational: where will we put the park, how will we organize the public transit system? This type of issue is said not to foster major political divisions. It is mainly a case of competition between neighbourhoods over who will get what, that is, over where municipal infrastructures will be located. In other words, municipal political space is deemed not to be ideological.

This approach as described by Peterson is corroborated in practice: we know that partisanship has historically been rejected at the local political level in the United States because of the reformists' view of the wrongs associated with the politicization of local politics. In the early twentieth century, reformists proposed to modernize local democracy and end patronage by ridding local institutions of partisanship and politics. This meant thinking of municipalities as small businesses with an administrative council having the main objective of serving their "clients," that is, property owners . Several reformist-type reforms were implemented to this end, including expanding local electoral districts and encouraging non-partisan election.

Local Political Parties

2nd approach - The practice of non-partisan elections

- In local elections, candidates' partisan affiliations cannot be indicated on the ballot.
- It is difficult to create new political parties due to strong bipartitism, encouraged by several measures (citizens cannot be members of two parties at the same time).

(Schleicher, 2007)

10

An ongoing reformist spirit has strongly marked local institutions in the United States. Most elections are said to be non-partisan; that is, candidates' partisan affiliations cannot be indicated on the ballot. But in big cities at least, all the candidates are affiliated with either the Democrats or the Republicans. The importance of monetary resources in election campaigns, even local ones, means that it is impossible to be independent. So the machinery of the two dominant parties does in fact operate at the local level. The only way for voters to discover candidates' partisan affiliations is when they are mentioned in the media (which isn't always the case (Schleicher, 2007).

It is also difficult to create a specifically local partisan system as bipartitism is very strong in the United States. The rules for becoming a recognized candidate are significant (votes obtained, signatures gathered), which limits the creation of new parties, even at the local level. Several states also prohibit citizens from becoming members of two parties.

Local Political Party and Political Competition – Approach 1

Local political parties and political competition – 1st approach

- National parties have a detrimental effect on local politics.
- "Partiocracy": Local democracy serves national parties' interests.
- Homogenization of local issues.

(Copus, 2004)

11

In the first approach, purely local political parties are seen as fostering a renewal of local democracy (Copus, 2004). Why is this? First, it is important to understand that in most European cities where this phenomenon is found, local parties have emerged alongside branches of national parties. So they co-exist in the same political arena. In such a context, local parties are, as it were, "challenging" branches of national political parties by introducing a different type of discourse that is more oriented toward local issues. European researchers thus see local parties as bearing the seeds of democratic renewal because they expect these organizations to allow citizens to more fully participate in local life. This view is based on a negative vision of local branches of national parties: the latter are said to impede the development of a strictly local democracy because: 1) national parties use the local arena for their own ends, as it becomes a space of patronage (hence the term "partiocracy"); and 2) their electoral platform is not adapted to local issues; local branches of national parties reflect national ideological divisions.

Local Political Party and Political Competition – Approach 1

- The role of local political parties in the context of the nationalization of local politics
- The theory of small political parties at the national level as challengers of the dominant political parties.

12

In this context, the presence of strictly local parties is said to show people's dissatisfaction with national political parties' work at the local level.
In order to support such hypotheses, Colin Copus and his team are basing their views on studies dealing with small political parties at the national level: despite there being very little chances of their actually taking power, they do succeed in electing a few candidates (Copus, 2004). In such a context, local political parties have an important contribution to make (and a relevance) to democracy because they are challenging the dominant parties (Copus et al.,). In sum, they are enhancing local political competition because they are forcing local branches of national parties to develop a local political agenda

Local Political Party and Political Competition – Approach 2

- The fact that party affiliations are not identified on the ballot accentuates the lack of information at the local level: voters are thereby deprived of important information that they could use to evaluate candidates.

(Schaffner & Streb, 2002; Elmendorf & Schleicher, forthcoming)

13

Because there are, strictly speaking, no local political parties in the United States, researchers' hypotheses do not directly focus on these organizations' role in local political competition but rather on the impact that their absence has in structuring the local political arena. According to one hypothesis, the high incumbent re-election rate at the municipal level stems from the fact that voters are inadequately informed about municipal politics due to: 1) poor media coverage; 2) little knowledge of municipalities' areas of responsibility; and 3) the absence of local political parties (Schaffner & Streb, 2002). This means that poorly informed voters do not have the information needed to evaluate the candidates' performance. And this is said to discourage them from going out to vote because of the high cost of obtaining the information (Schaffner et al., 2001).

In the United States, all candidates belong to a party, but this information cannot be indicated on the ballot. This is what is called non-partisan elections. Researchers emphasize that this adds to the overall lack of information.

This hypothesis on the effect of non-partisan election on lack of information is based on the theory of the rational voter, where voters base their political judgments on the political information available to them. Some voters may also base their choices on subjective criteria. The lack of information is said to increase the number of voters in the second category. This hypothesis is also based on the idea of American voters' strong identification with the two dominant political parties. This hypothesis is made possible due to the strong element of bipartitism in the United States. Without any reference to the two dominant parties on the ballots, voters find themselves "at a loss," as it were, without the usual information about the candidates' party affiliations that they could use to evaluate them (Elmendorf & Schleicher, forthcoming).

On the basis of these two hypotheses, researchers have proposed the following to remedy the lack of information: encourage the setting up of local political parties by 1) allowing candidates' party affiliations to be indicated on the ballot, and 2) abolishing the prohibition against membership in two parties at the same time to allow for the creation of strictly local political parties (Schleicher, 2007; Elmendorf & Schleicher, forthcoming).

In Brief

Approach 1	Theory on small political parties Local political parties have the potential to enhance political competition because they challenge local branches of national parties.
Approach 2	Theories on partisan affiliation and the rational elector Non-partisan elections prevent partisan affiliation and lead to a lack of information at the local level. To enhance local competition, we need to reform non-partisan elections.

14

In Canada

- Reformist legacy: There should be no partisanship at the local level.
- A partisan system that is specialized according to the political level.
- Local political parties: There are some local political parties in Canada, although not very many. The specific case of Québec.

15

Where can we situate Canada in relation to these two approaches to local competition? Canada is actually situated between the two, but is a little closer to the American situation.

Firstly, Canada has been influenced by the reformist legacy, especially in terms of the dominant discourse that maintains that there should be no partisanship at the local level. That is why most local elections in Canada are of the non-partisan type. However, unlike the situation in the United States, there is no strong partisan identification in Canada because bipartitism does not dominate the entire political system. In Canada, the partisan system is specialized according to the political level. There are partisan families that are similar at different levels (the Liberals, for example), but these organizations are independent from each other and have no formal ties with one another.

There are also two major exceptions that bring Canada's situation closer to the case in Europe: there are local parties in two provinces, Québec and British Columbia. Let us look a little more closely at the latter situation.

Political Party Situation at the Local Level

	Ontario	British Columbia	Quebec
Ballot: partisan affiliation allowed	Not allowed	Allowed	Allowed
Legal recognition of local political party	No	Yes «Elector organizations» or «Civic political parties»	Yes «Local Political parties»
Public Funding for local candidates and parties	Rebates for contribution to a candidate	No	Reimbursement, tax benefits for contributors, allowances to candidates and parties
Particularities	Case of Toronto	Mainly in Vancouver	In almost every town of 20,000 inhabitants and more

16

In the meantime, in Canada, we find contrasting experiences. Here I use the example of the three provinces with the most populous cities. We see three different situations related to local political parties: 1) in Ontario, there is no formal recognition of local political parties; 2) in British Columbia, there is a weak recognition of local political parties, but with a civic label; and 3) in Quebec, there is a formal recognition of local political parties, with rules very similar to those for the provinces.

An Example of a Local Party System

An Ontarian municipality	A British Columbia municipality	A Quebec municipality
A series of independent candidates.	A mix of purely local party, political associations of independent candidates, and independent candidates.	A mix of purely local parties, political associations of independent candidates, and independent candidates.

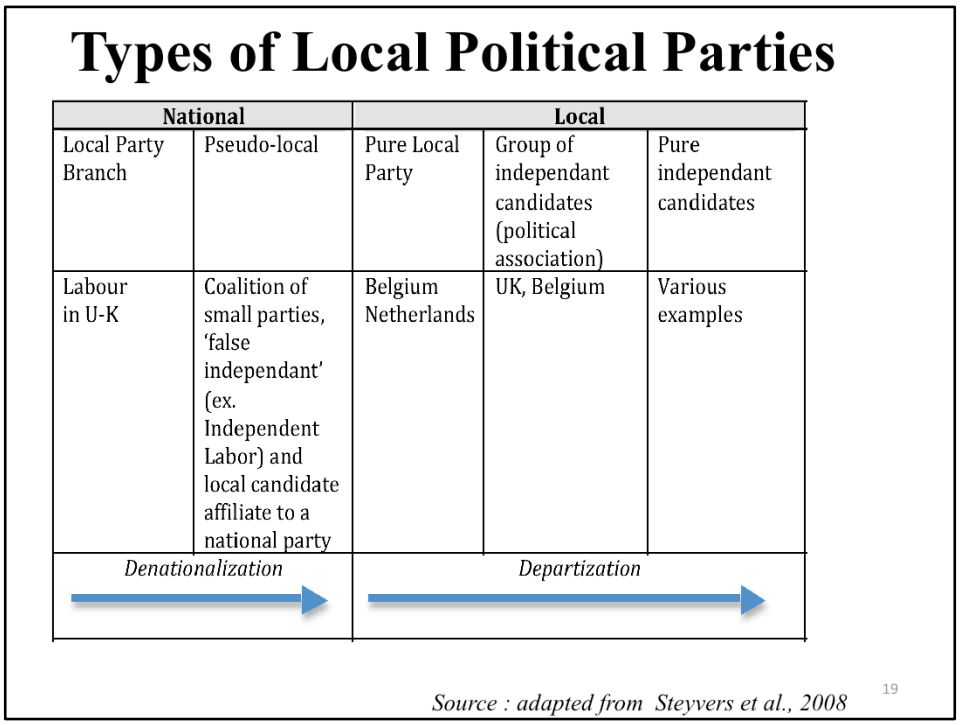
17

What is the local partisan system like in Canada? We present here a typology of local political parties in the three most populous provinces.
In Ontario, candidates for local elections are typically independent councillors.
In British Columbia, in Vancouver, local political parties (such as COPE), groups of independent candidates (such as NPA), and independent candidates can be found running in the same election. The situation in Québec is similar to that in British Columbia, but with very few independent candidates.
But, in every case, all the candidates and political parties are local. This is the main difference that sets Canada apart from Europe and the United States: the local party system is strictly local.

Some of the few Canadian Studies on local political parties

Research Issues	Authors
Political Parties	*Différents travaux de Quesnel (1980's)* *Quesnel et Belley (1991)* *Belley (1992; 2001;2003)* *Bureau of Municipal Research, 1969.*
Party system	*Miller (1975)*
Municipal ideology (apolitism)	*Collin et Roberston (2004)* *Miller (1975)* *Easton & Tennant (1969)* *Bherer & Breux (2012)* *Belley et al.(2008).*
Votes, funding and candidates	*Kushner et al., (1997), Stanwick (2000),* *Cutler & Matthews, 2002.* *McDermid, 2006.* *Taylor, 2011;*

In such a context, Canadian researchers have tended to study local political parties and the types of candidates at the local level, generally by carrying out case studies. we believe that we need to revisit these pioneering studies and look at the contribution of local political parties and independent candidates at the local level. In short: what is the relevance of local political parties in the Canadian context?
In order to answer this question, we need to go back to a typology of local political parties.



Our review of the literature allows us to set up an initial typology of the partisan phenomenon at the local level, based on local organizations' or candidates' ties with national parties.

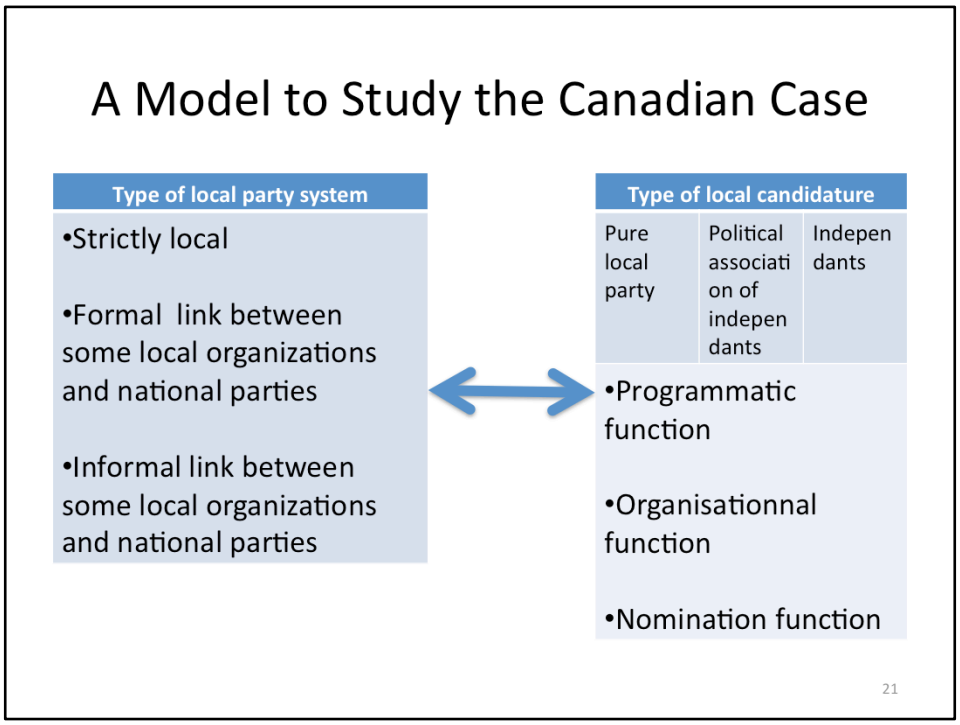
On the national side, we find partisan organizations with strong ties to national parties. The first case of this is local branches of national parties: local parties are simply branches of national parties. "Pseudo-local" organizations are national parties that are present on the local scene but without any clear identification as such (although there is such a formal identification). Coalitions of parties are often found in elections by list: national parties (often smaller ones) ally themselves to make up a list, with a new name that does not correspond to their national label. "False independents" result from conflicts within a party: the party rejects a candidate, who nonetheless decides to run in simultaneously affirming his/her independence and ideological affiliation. That was the case for example with Ken Livingstone, who was elected mayor of London in 2000 under the banner of "Independent Labour." After he won, the Labour Party reclaimed him.
On the local side are various forms of partisan organizations with no formal ties to national parties; that is, such ties are neither displayed nor claimed. Purely local parties are those that assemble a team of candidates that are prepared to work together to carry out an electoral platform. Groups of independent candidates bring together candidates without a platform. In some cases, these candidates even reject party discipline. Purely independent candidates are those that run on their own.
The practices in Europe and the United States allow us to establish a typology of local political parties. This typology shows the various organizational forms but does not describe the partisan system. For example, in England, several local partisan systems include 5 types of local political parties. But they are ideal types because, in reality, there are different nuances and scenarios with each types of local political parties.

Types of Local Political Parties (according to their electoral platform)

- Localist parties: General focus on the quality of the local administration and democracy. A political character.
- Protest parties: Driven by opposition to a municipal plan, or by a general dissatisfaction with municipal administration.
- Interest parties: Devote themselves to the interest of specific groups of residents.

20

Another typology more specifically focuses on local parties without national ties, in emphasizing their electoral platform, that is, their programmatic function.



But the Canadian situation shows that, in order to obtain a more accurate picture of local political parties, we need to look not only at their programmatic function but also at their organizational and nomination functions. We must also link these functions to the municipal context, that is: 1) the local partisan system; and 2) local parties formal and informal ties to national parties.

We can advance the hypothesis that the three types of functions are not equally well developed at the local level. We in fact know that, in Canada, local parties' electoral platforms are usually not very well developed; that is, they generally present an apolitical type of discourse centered on good governance. And we can say that their organizational function is not very well developed either: these parties tend to have a poorly developed membership. However, the area that we need to examine more closely is the nomination function: how political parties use their resources to win elections.

Relevant Questions on the Canadian Case

- The role of funding (public and private contribution)
- The duration of a local political parties
- The effects of political parties on local competition

22

Three questions seem to be especially relevant:

What role does funding play in Canadian municipal elections? What kind of financial advantages are there in forming a political party? In Québec, it is quite clear that forming a political party provides access to financial resources (public funding for political parties) and reduces the financial risk incurred by independent candidates. More work needs to be done in this area regarding the other Canadian provinces.

How long do local political parties last? Do these organizations have a certain lifespan, or are they created only at election time? In other words, are local political parties organizations whose main purpose is to win elections?

What effects do political parties have on competition:

Is there more opposition in municipalities where there are political parties than in municipalities of similar size where there aren't any political parties?

As a follow-up to our discussion of American studies and the hypothesis of the rational voter, do local political parties help to reduce the lack of information (through the phenomenon of partisan identification or simply by providing information on local public policies)? What challenges do candidates running in a context of limited information face?

What are the differences between the electoral platforms of the various types of local candidates in Canada (member of a political party or political association or independent candidate)?

That's where we are at the moment. Over the next few months, we will examine the legislation of various Canadian provinces in greater detail in order to better understand the legislative framework underpinning the types of candidates at the municipal level. We know that our presentation today has been quite exploratory. Its aim was to situate the Canadian experience in relation to other contexts where some very few studies on local political competition have been conducted. We feel that the Canadian situation could make an interesting contribution because it is one of the rare cases where we find purely local political parties and a completely local partisan system. We believe that this will allow us to develop some original hypotheses in the future about the Canadian case and about electoral competition and the role of local political party on it.

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