

Retrospective Voting in the 2017 Montréal and Québec Municipal Elections

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The impact of the state of the economy on election outcomes has been thoroughly studied in the political science literature. Both at the aggregate (Anderson et al., 2010; Bélanger et al., 2010; Books et al., 1999; Duch et al., 2008; Gélinau, 2013) and individual levels (Bélanger et al., 2011; Kiewiet, 1983; Kinder et al., 1979, 1981; Markus, 1988; Nadeau et al., 2013), the electoral fortune of incumbent presidents, prime ministers, governors and local representatives all around the democratic world has been linked to how well the economy performed during their terms, or at least the perception of it. These studies thus strongly indicate that incumbent administrations are being held accountable by the public for the state of economic conditions during their tenure.

Despite the large number of studies examining this phenomenon at the national and sub-national level, including in the Canadian context (Anderson, 2006; Bélanger et al., 2010, 2011), we know much less about it at the municipal level. One of the reasons for this is the lack of appropriate individual-level data to test this theory of retrospective voting. Yet, despite some obstacles, there are reasons to believe that municipal election outcomes can be affected by the economy since local economic indicators are available and that past research has shown that voters are able to use retrospective evaluations at the local level of government (Anderson et al., 2017; Berry et al., 2007; Boyne et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2007).

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of retrospective economic evaluations on vote choice in the 2017 municipal elections in Montréal and Québec. Using the Canadian Municipal Election Study (CMES) data from both cities, we assess how voters perceived the economic performance of their cities in the year prior to the election and we test whether or not these perceptions affected their decision when the time came to vote for their next mayor. We find that the retrospective economic evaluation of voters in Montréal did have an effect on their vote choice, even when controlling for variable such as party identification and satisfaction toward the mayor. However, the findings for Québec are less conclusive and suggest that general opinions toward incumbent Régis Labeaume mattered more to the vote in that local election than economic evaluations.

Economic Voting Theory

The inception of economic voting can be traced back to Key (1966) and its *reward/punishment hypothesis*. According to him, voters assess the performance of the incumbent candidate and use this evaluation to make their vote choice. Therefore, Key assumes that elected official who performed well will be rewarded by being re-elected while those who did not perform as well will be punished by being replaced by a challenger.

Even though many performance indicators have been used over the years to test retrospective voting (see Canes-Wrone et al., 2002; Jacobson, 1996; Kriner et al., 2007), the economic performance evaluation is probably the most studied (Healy et al., 2013). At the aggregate level in the US, relations have been established between support for the incumbent and many economic indicators such as the unemployment rate (Books et al., 1999; Fair, 1978; Hibbs Jr, 1982; MacKuen, 1983; Mueller, 1970), the inflation (Kenski, 1977; Kernell, 1978; Monroe, 1978; Norpoth, 1984) and the available income (Abramowitz et al., 1986; Erickson, 1989; Lanoue, 1987). Duch et al. (2008) observed this relation in other settings, despite differences in the magnitude of the effects. Individual analysis also reached the conclusion that voters who have a better opinion of the economic situation are more likely to vote for the incumbent (Healy et al., 2013; Lewis-Beck et al., 2000). A study by (Lewis-Beck, 1990) showed that European voters, like their American counterparts, were also influenced by their assessment of the economic situation when making their vote choice.

Support for this behaviour has also been found in Canadian elections, at both the federal (Anderson, 2008; Anderson et al., 2010; Clarke et al., 1989) and the provincial level (Anderson, 2008; Bélanger et al., 2011; Tellier, 2006). According to Nadeau et al. (1993), while it is genuine, the effect of economic indicators on election results should not be overstated. Also, Gélinau et al. (2005) raised doubts about the ability of voters to accurately attribute the responsibility for the economic situation to the good government level. These last results could be explained by the fact that Canadian voters may have misperceptions about the economic situation (Nadeau et al., 2000). However Anderson (2008) argues that these discrepancies observed in the conclusion of the previously mentioned studies is due to the nature of the data used for each analysis. Studies based on aggregate data measure the objective impact of economic conditions and are more sensitive to biases, while those based on individual level data measure the subjective impact.

There is also an ongoing debate in the literature about the causal relationship established between the subjective evaluation of the economy and incumbent support. Some authors heavily criticized it, claiming that vote choice (Evans et al., 2006) and partisanship (Evans et al., 2010) influence economic evaluation and not the other way around. (Lewis-Beck, 2006) offered a methodological response to these criticisms and concluded that economic evaluation had a causal effect on vote choice. However, the debate is not settle and the issue of the causal relationship is still uncertain.

Contrary to their national and subnational counterparts, municipal elections did not receive the same attention, however, and despite the support this theory receives at national and sub-national level, it could not translate that easily to the municipal venue. Voters usually rely heavily on cues and heuristics to make their vote choice, but the low information available and the absence of a highly structured party system at this election level makes these cues much weaker. For example, past research showed that voters in municipal elections were more likely to be affected by cognitive biases as ballot order effect (Tessier et al., 2018). The low information available to voters in this setting might also be problematic since it could make it more difficult for voters to untangle the

responsibility of the different levels of government and neutralize the effect of economic voting (Powell et al., 1993; Whitten et al., 1999). Studies on Canadian voters regarding their knowledge of the responsibilities of provincial and federal governments showed that the division of powers between the two levels of government is not well understood by all voters (Cutler, 2004, 2008). This phenomenon could be exacerbated at the municipal level because of the low information that is available. Yet at the same time, since it is the level of government that is the closest to them, voters could be more aware of municipal responsibilities than they are for the provincial and federal levels. In the event that the former scenario is right, it could lead to an increased use of geographic heuristics, that is, when voters use their evaluation at other levels of elections to assess the performance of elected officials (Cutler, 2002; Reeves et al., 2012).

Yet, despite these potential obstacles, the literature seems to indicate that retrospective evaluations can play a role in the vote choice at the municipal level. First, past studies concluded that voters are able to use retrospective evaluations at local levels of government in the US (Berry et al., 2007; Oliver et al., 2007) and the UK (Boyne et al., 2009). In an analysis of Flemish municipal elections held between 1982 and 2000, Vermeir et al. (2006) concluded that incumbent results were impacted by taxation policies in their city, but also by those of the surrounding municipalities. These results could be an indication that voters were able to attribute accurately the responsibility for taxation policy or that they were, at the very least, aware of the policies themselves. Finally, the few existing articles on the subject also found evidence of economic voting at the municipal level. A study by Martins et al. (2013) on municipal elections in Portugal found, using aggregate data that the perception of the economy does matter at the local level. The only two Canadian studies touching the subject, by Cutler and Matthews (2002) for Vancouver and by Anderson and colleagues (2017) for Toronto, reached that same conclusion.

To summarize, even though the municipal level has been for the most part left out of the economic voting literature, there are reasons to believe that results found at other election levels could apply to local elections. While it is true that municipal election characteristics could, in theory, limit the capacity of voters to do so, many studies indicate that it is likely not the case. In addition, the limitations mentioned earlier would likely prevent an accurate objective evaluation of the economy, but as Anderson (2008) suggested it would not necessarily affect subjective evaluations. Therefore, the CMES data allow us to test the following hypothesis: Voters' subjective retrospective economic evaluations affect the likelihood of supporting the incumbent mayoral candidate in the 2017 Montréal and Québec municipal elections. Prior to testing this hypothesis, we outline the method that will be used to do so.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this chapter will be presented in two stages. First, we will examine the CMES respondents' opinion of the economy in Montréal and in Québec. In addition, despite the fact that it is not the main focus of this chapter, the subjective evaluations reported in the survey will be compared to objective indicators. This

comparison will provide an idea of how accurately voters are able to evaluate the economy at the municipal level. We will also report the satisfaction level toward the incumbent mayor. This variable is closely tied to the voters' assessment of the economy and to their vote, and might therefore affect the nature or the magnitude of economic voting.

In the second stage of the analysis, we consider the effect of economic voting in multivariate analyses to test the retrospective voting hypothesis established earlier. Two-steps models will be presented for each city in order to test the robustness of the results. But before diving deeper in the controls, we need to discuss the dependent variable and the independent variable of interest.

The dependent variable that will be used in all our models is the support for the incumbent mayor (1 or 0) as reported in the vote choice question in the post-campaign wave of the CMES survey. This choice of dependent variable raises a theoretical and methodological question: why only use the vote for mayor? Voters in both cities also must cast a vote for a city councillor; and in Montréal, they must cast an additional vote to select a borough mayor. We consider only the vote for city mayor because of how central this position is in municipal elections. Media coverage focuses almost solely on the mayoral candidates. Also, because the executive council in both cities are much less known the incumbent mayor ends up being the one who is viewed as mainly responsible for the administration. Also, the party system in these two cities are heavily organized around the mayoral candidates. For example, of the five candidates considered in this study, three are the creator or the first leader of their party. In this context, it is likely that a vote for any other race is highly influenced by the vote at the mayoral level. Finally, since economic indicators are rarely available at the borough or district level, economic voting at such levels would not be very meaningful because it would require the use of geographical heuristics.

The independent variable of interest is the respondents' evaluation of the economy in the last year prior to the election. The original three-category response choices were: "better", "worse" and "not made much difference". This coding will be kept in the model since it will allow more flexibility in case the relationship with the dependent variable is not linear (as compared to a continuous variable that would be coded between -1 and 1).

A first model in each city will also include a series of socio-demographic variables: age (continuous), university graduates (1 or 0), female (1 or 0), property owner (1 or 0) and income (continuous). In Montréal, a French language variable will also be included, while in Québec the language control will be replaced by a variable that identifies respondents from the center boroughs (both variables are coded 1 or 0). These first models also include a conservatism index (continuous) and party identification (1 or 0).

As we mentioned earlier, the causal effect of economic evaluations has been criticized by some authors. To test for the robustness of the results, we will also present a second model for each city that includes additional variables that are expected to drain away the effect of economic evaluations given how close they are to it. These two additional

variables are satisfaction with the general performance of the incumbent (1 or 0) and evaluation scores for each of the main candidates (continuous).

Findings

Table 1 presents citizens' retrospective assessments of economic conditions in their respective municipalities at the time of the elections.

Table 1. Perceived direction of the Economy in Montréal and Québec (%)

	Montréal	Québec
Better	39.2	59.0
Not made much difference	39.6	31.7
Worse	21.3	9.3

We see that, on balance, Montréalers perceived the economy of their city has having improved over the past year. More individuals thought that economic conditions had gotten better than gotten worse. Note however that close to 40% of survey respondents in Montréal perceived no change in the economy over that same period. Overall, the state of retrospective economic perceptions in Montréal was relatively close to the mark. As Table 2 shows, the unemployment rate in Montréal had slightly decreased (-0.3%) during the year preceding the election campaign. Another objective indicator that we can look at is the percentage of housing starts which confirms that Montréal's economy was on an upward trend at the time of the elections.

Table 2. Variation in the Economy in Montréal and Québec between 2016 and 2017

	Montréal	Québec
Unemployment (%)	-0.3	-0.1
Housing starts (%)	19.3	11.6
Number of tourists (%)	5.1	6.9

Things are different in the case of Québec. First, retrospective economic perceptions were much more positive in Québec than in Montréal. As seen in Table 1, as many as 59% of survey respondents felt that economic conditions in their municipality had improved over the past year while only 9% thought that it had deteriorated. While these perceptions more or less fit with the overall popular impression that in recent years Québec's economy has been more dynamic than that of Montréal, they nevertheless turn out to have been overly optimistic. Indeed, objective indicators like housing starts and the unemployment rate reveal that in Québec economic conditions barely improved during that same one-year period. Certainly, these indicators suggest that Québec's economy was not going quite as well, relatively speaking, as that of Montréal. Among the objective economic indicators looked at in Table 2, only in the domain of tourism did Québec enjoy a slight edge over Montréal during the year that preceded the municipal elections.

Table 3. Satisfaction with Incumbent in Montréal and Québec (%)

	Montréal	Québec
Satisfied	53.9	63.0
Not satisfied	46.1	37.0

Beyond economic performance, how satisfied of their incumbent mayor were citizens at the time of the 2017 municipal elections? Table 3 offers a comparative portrait of satisfaction levels for the two cities under investigation. Overall, we find that in both municipalities a majority of the survey respondents expressed general satisfaction with the performance of their incumbent mayor. That said, satisfaction was slightly greater in Québec than in Montréal, with 63% of individuals in the former city expressing satisfaction compared with 54% in the latter. In other words, Denis Coderre generated less satisfaction than Régis Labeaume, but still a majority of Montréalers proved to be satisfied with his overall performance as mayor. One last thing to note regarding these incumbent satisfaction levels is that they display moderate correlations with retrospective economic evaluations, but that the correlation is found to be greater for Québec than Montréal (Pearson's r of 0.43 and 0.32, respectively). What this result suggests is that incumbent satisfaction among residents of Montréal is related to economic performance, but not as much as is the case among residents of Québec. Since we have seen earlier that economic judgments were overly optimistic in Québec, this may partly explain the greater satisfaction found for that city's incumbent mayor.

To what extent are retrospective economic evaluations related to vote choice in the two Québec municipal elections under study? Tables 4 and 5 present results from logit regression models estimating the choice to vote for the incumbent mayor versus another mayoral candidate in the election. In a first step, we estimate the model with economic perceptions as the main independent variable together with socio-demographic (age, gender, language for Montréal, neighbourhood for Québec), socioeconomic (education, income, home ownership) and political variables (conservatism, party identification) included as controls. In a second step, the model is re-estimated with the inclusion of further, more stringent controls in the form of satisfaction with the incumbent mayor and candidate evaluations.

Looking first at Model 1 in both tables, we see that in both municipalities assessments of the local economy are associated with incumbent support in the expected direction. Compared with the omitted reference category (a positive assessment answer to the question), neutral and negative assessments yield statistically significant decreases in the vote for the incumbent mayor. The relationship also seems to be linear since regression coefficients are larger for a negative assessment than for a neutral one. The economic voting hypothesis is thus strongly supported, in both Montréal and Québec, with these preliminary multivariate estimates. That said, the effect of economic evaluations appears to be slightly larger in magnitude for the Coderre vote than for the Labeaume vote, but the latter candidate still benefits from economic voting given that the economic assessments are much more positive in Québec than in Montréal as seen earlier.

Table 4. The Economy and Incumbent Support in Montréal (Logit)

	Model 1	Model 2
Direction of the economy		
Worse	-2.317* (-4.96)	-1.762* (-3.18)
Not made much difference	-1.141* (-3.63)	-0.737* (-2.01)
Age	0.0172 (1.68)	0.0101 (0.88)
French	-0.926* (-2.74)	-1.323* (-3.14)
University	0.570 (1.87)	0.705* (2.05)
Female	0.329 (1.18)	0.218 (0.69)
Income	-0.0516 (-0.72)	0.0493 (0.59)
Owner	-0.177 (-0.53)	-0.231 (-0.59)
Conservatism index	0.279 (1.55)	0.0121 (0.06)
Party ID		
Coalition Montréal	0.206 (0.31)	0.875 (1.09)
Équipe Denis Coderre	2.408* (6.63)	0.746 (1.64)
Projet Montréal	-1.753* (-4.24)	-1.145* (-2.35)
Satisfaction with incumbent		0.978* (2.09)
Plante		-0.0326* (-3.91)
Coderre		0.0368* (4.15)
Intercept	-0.824 (-1.05)	-0.955 (-0.85)
Observations	539	518
Pseudo R^2	0.481	0.572

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

We can note that these preliminary economic voting effects are robust to the inclusion of several control variables in the model. Obviously, party identification exerts a strong influence on the vote decision in both cities. Identification with the party of the mayor (Équipe Denis Coderre or Équipe Labeaume) boosts support for the incumbent candidate whereas identification with a party of the opposition, and notably with the official opposition party (Projet Montréal and Démocratie Québec), significantly decreases it. Of the socio-demographic and socioeconomic variables included in the model, only language is found to have a statistically significant influence on the vote, with Francophones in Montréal supporting incumbent Denis Coderre less than non-Francophones.

Are these economic voting effects robust to the inclusion of other control variables such as satisfaction with the incumbent mayor and candidate evaluations? These are important dimensions of municipal electoral campaigns and they tend to receive as much media coverage as local economic conditions; as such they are likely to exert substantial influence on the voting decision of citizens. Model 2 in tables 4 and 5 presents logit regression estimates of an incumbent vote model that adds these two vote determinants to the equation.

Table 5. The Economy and Incumbent Support in Québec (Logit)

	Model 1	Model 2
Direction of the economy		
Worse	-1.311* (-2.53)	0.487 (0.66)
Not made much difference	-0.685* (-3.03)	0.115 (0.39)
Age	-0.000810 (-0.11)	0.0140 (1.47)
City center	0.261 (1.22)	0.0265 (0.10)
University	0.242 (1.09)	0.308 (1.05)
Female	-0.105 (-0.50)	0.179 (0.67)
Conservatism index	-0.172 (-0.98)	0.318 (1.18)
Income	0.0858 (1.43)	0.0682 (0.85)
ownerDummy	-0.426 (-1.52)	-0.417 (-1.15)
Party ID		
Démocratie Québec	-1.326* (-3.84)	-0.940* (-2.14)
Équipe Labeaume	2.889* (10.92)	1.295* (3.37)
Option Capitale-nationale	-1.310 (-1.64)	-0.782 (-0.88)
Québec 21	-1.877* (-4.76)	-1.322* (-2.23)
Satisfaction with incumbent		1.087* (2.64)
Labeaume		0.0769* (8.15)
Guerette		-0.0277* (-4.51)
Gosselin		-0.0279* (-4.97)
Intercept	-0.801 (-1.47)	-4.745* (-5.15)
Observations	972	898
Pseudo R^2	0.506	0.670

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$

Turning first to the results for Montréal (Table 4, second column) we can see that our economic voting hypothesis continues to be supported in that municipal election. In addition, satisfaction with the performance of incumbent mayor Coderre and evaluations of Coderre himself as a candidate are positively and significantly associated with support for him. These variables also suppress the relationship between identification with the Équipe Denis Coderre party and support for the incumbent mayor initially found in Model 1. Projet Montréal party identification and evaluations of Valérie Plante are significantly (and negatively) related to support for the incumbent mayor. Finally, an individual's language and education level also predict incumbent vote choice in this extended model, with non-Francophones and those holding a university degree supporting Coderre in significantly greater numbers.

The findings are different for Québec (Table 5, second column). The inclusion of controls for incumbent satisfaction and candidate evaluations wipes out the economic voting effect previously observed in Model 1. In fact, we notice that the inclusion of these

control variables adds much more to the explained variance in Québec than Montréal (the pseudo- R^2 increases by 0.16, from the first to the second model, in the former case while it only increases by 0.09 in the latter case). The moderately high correlation between incumbent satisfaction and economic evaluations even leads to a reversal of the relationship found between these economic perceptions and the dependent variable, which becomes negative in Model 2 (although it is not statistically significant from zero). What the results of Model 2 suggest is that, in comparison to Montréal, the vote decision in Québec hinged much more on people's views of Labeaume; that is, on whether they identify with his party, whether they like him as a candidate, and whether they are satisfied with the general performance of his administration. In other words, in the 2017 municipal election in Québec there was not much room left for other factors (like socio-demographic cleavages or assessments of the local economy) to affect the voting decision of citizens.

Table 6. Model-Based Predicted Probability of voting for the incumbent (%)

	Montréal	Québec
Better	42.2	36.7
Not made much difference	25.9	39.4
Worse	11.2	48.5

Table 6 presents the results of simulations that allow to better appreciate the magnitude of the impact of economic evaluations on incumbent vote choice in the two municipalities under study. These simulations are based on the second models of tables 4 and 5, that is, the full models that control for socio-demographic and socioeconomic factors as well as conservatism, party identification, satisfaction with the incumbent and candidate evaluations. The first column of Table 6 indicates that support for Denis Coderre in Montréal, all things being equal, would increase by a total of 30 percentage points going from all negative assessments to all positive assessments of the change in local economic conditions. This is a substantial impact that suggests that mayor Coderre may have been re-elected had Montréal's economy improved much more than it did by the time of the 2017 election – and had Montréalers adjusted their economic evaluations accordingly. The second column of Table 6 presents the simulation results for Québec, although these are not as useful to look at given the lack of a significant economic voting effect found in the full model of Table 5 and the fact, already noted above, that the relationship between economic perceptions and support for Régis Labeaume becomes reversed (so going in the unexpected negative direction) once we control for incumbent satisfaction and candidate evaluations.

Conclusion

Economic voting constitutes a long tradition in the study of electoral behaviour in democratic countries. Most of the extant studies have focused on the national and/or sub-national levels of government, to the point where we still do not know much about the extent to which local economic conditions are related, if at all, to municipal election outcomes. What is more, while a few economic voting studies have been conducted at the

municipal level in Canada, this research question has hitherto been entirely neglected in the province of Quebec.

In this paper we have provided the very first look at economic voting in Quebec municipal elections, using the individual-level survey data collected by the CMES. We have thus been able to assess the impact of retrospective economic evaluations on the 2017 municipal vote decision in two of the largest cities in that province: Montréal and Québec.

Two main findings have emerged from our empirical analyses. First, retrospective perceptions about the state of the economy at the municipal level do seem to be related to the vote decision of citizens in both cities beyond the impact of other factors such as socio-demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, conservatism and partisanship. Second, this economic voting effect seems to have been stronger in Montréal than in Québec. In fact, once controls for general satisfaction with the incumbent administration's job and evaluations of individual candidates were added to the explanatory model, we ceased to observe a statistically significant effect of economic perceptions on vote choice in Québec City, but not Montréal.

We noted that economic evaluations were much more positive in Québec than in Montréal, despite objective economic indicators not justifying such a gap in perceptions; and, that economic judgments in Québec were correlated more strongly to evaluations of incumbent mayor Labeaume's overall performance in office. We also noted that the level of satisfaction and the evaluations of candidates accounted for much more of the explained variance in the vote decision in Québec than Montréal. Taken together, these findings suggest that economic voting effects in Québec may have been stifled by general views towards mayor Labeaume and his administration.

While this study represents a first insight into the phenomenon of economic voting in municipal elections in Quebec, it also highlights the potential that elections at this level of government have. The fact that municipal administrations offer more proximity services than any other levels makes it more likely that the everyday life of voters could be affected by their policies. While we focused on sociotropic evaluations, future work could tackle the effect of pocketbook voting or the effect of economic policies implemented by elected municipal officials. We hope that further investigations of economic voting at the municipal level will help us better understand electoral behaviour at this level of government.

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