Universe of Support: Suburban Voters in Canadian Federal Elections

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the position of suburban voters within Canadian federal elections. In response to the impression that federal elections are won and lost in the greater Toronto area I ask - how do suburban voters factor into the campaign strategies of political parties? I examine the significance of suburban voters, emphasizing those in Toronto, as a contested demographic. I draw attention to the allocation of campaign resources through analysis of the 2019 party leader tours of the Liberals, Conservatives, and New Democrats. This is supplemented by an analysis of party platforms from 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2019 as a measure of campaign marketing. In doing so, I seek to address the nature of Canadian elections and normatively reflect on the consequences of this nature.

Suburban Voters In Canadian Federal Elections

Often repeated, but seldom verified, the belief that elections are won and lost in Toronto is one of the oldest clichés in Canadian federal politics. This is reflected in rhetoric from provinces, such as Alberta, that claim the concentration of power in Toronto produces relative powerlessness for western Canada. The argument concludes that Toronto's influence marginalizes the interests of other regions, and therefore challenges national unity. This chapter takes these claims, not as a cliché, but rather as a significant insight into Canadian politics. Thus, the question becomes, why is Toronto significant to election outcomes? The literature on political campaigns suggests that a campaign ought to direct the bulk of its resources at those known as swing voters (Flanagan 2010). Therefore, the time and labour of Canada's three major federal political parties in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the suburbs surrounding the City of Toronto, in the 2019 election suggest that the GTA is full of these voters. Building off the works of Borden, Perella, and Roy (2015) I argue that suburban voters represent a distinct demographic of swing voters. Utilizing this conception of suburban voters, I contend that the importance of Toronto in election outcomes is significantly linked to the number of suburban ridings in the region. This chapter seeks to confirm the existence of suburban voters as a distinct and influential set of swing voters and examines the extent to which political parties recognize this phenomenon. In doing so, I seek to address the nature of Canadian elections and normatively reflect on the consequences of this.

This supposition is not without academic substantiation. Dating well back to the 1960s, an examination has been made of the relationship between voting patterns and sub-regional communities (Lawrence, 1963). However, the bulwark of the literature has only examined the dichotomy between urban and rural voters. There is a significant consensus among scholars that urban voters tend to be ideologically progressive, and more likely to vote for left-leaning parties than their rural counterparts (Henderson, 2004; Bittner, 2007; Bodet, 2014). Further,

Bodet (2014) articulates that certain political parties maintain stable support amongst specific communities. Sub-regionally this can be articulated as the stable support for the LPC amongst urban voters, and the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) among rural voters (578). The consensus on the existence of voter bases, defined by sub-regional cleavages, is useful in producing a framework in which to place voting patterns in Canada; However, this fails to generate the logics which produce our understanding of politics of the GTA which is neither urban or rural.

Alan Walks (2004) proposes a third category, suburban, to distinguish a separate set of voters defined by their sub-regional location; Therefore, he differentiates himself from the works of those who have established the existence of the urban and rural dichotomy in Canadian politics. Specifically, he has described suburban voters to be more inclined than their urban counterparts to vote for right-wing parties (270). Since then, very little has been published on the subject matter. Borden, Perella and Roy (2015) are the most recent, if not only, academics to return to the distinction of suburban voters from urban and rural. Specifically, they argue suburban voters exist as the medium between rural and urban voters. They explain, based on Walks (2004), that suburban voters are more likely to support the CPC than urban voters but less likely than the rural voters. Inversely this can be said about their support for the LPC. This implies that suburban voters are not part of either parties' base, and potentially exist as a demographic of swing voters. Therefore, parties ideologically left of the LPC such as the New Democratic Party (NDP) will not place suburban voters in their universe of support, but rather target urban voters.

A debate in the discourse does not exist on the existence of suburban voters but challenges subregional voting patterns as a whole, however; What research exists confirms there are consistent distinctions between the voting patterns of rural, suburban, and urban voters. This has been done by maintaining that there are stable voting pattern differences between rural, urban, and suburban voters when accommodating for other socio-economic factors (i.e. religiosity, income, level of education) which may influence voting patterns (Walks, 2004; Borden, Perella, & Roy, 2015). It must be noted that Borden, Perella, and Roy (2015) acknowledge that vote choice did fluctuate by province. Specifically, they point to the outliers of Alberta and Prince Edward Island (PEI) where the trends amongst subregional voting blocs are harder to distinguish. On the account of Alberta, they conclude this is largely related to the political culture of the province. This means that the difference between rural, suburban, and urban voters was maintained, but all voters were more likely to vote for a conservative party. In PEI it is its' small homogenous population which makes differences between rural, suburban, and urban voters difficult to distinguish (122). The lack of research on the subject matter is a detriment to the discourse on Canadian elections. Further inquiry would help illuminate the relation between the various factors which inform vote choice. Doing so would expand the empirical and normative evaluation of Canadian federal elections. To further the discourse on Canadian elections this chapter expands on Borden, Perella, and Roy's (2015) research, and investigates the extent to which suburban voters exist as a demographic of swing voters.

Methodology

The nature of Canadian federal elections is such that political parties must manage their resources to produce their desired outcome. As such, not all political parties maintain the same goals. Parties such as the Liberal Party of Canada, Conservative Party of Canada, and arguably The New Democratic Party all intend to win as many seats as possible to form the government. To win seats a party must know which geographical and demographic coalitions exist in their universe of support. A universe of support is made up of core voters (those

who have previously and continue to be committed to voting for a specific party), and those who could be persuaded to vote for that party. Persuadable voters are crucial to election outcomes because they extend a party's support far enough win the number of seats needed to form government (Flanagan, 2010) I argue that suburban voters are a highly contested group of voters, therefore campaigns ought to expend significant resources to persuade these voters. To examine this, I look at the campaign stops made by party leaders of the LPC, CPC, and NDP and the platforms of their parties.

As a metric of the resources and energy being expended on suburban voters, I count the number of stops by party leaders in suburban ridings (CPAC, 2019). However, there is an absence of data on the subject from previous elections. As such, the scope of this analysis is limited to the 2019 election. This analysis codifies suburban ridings as those ridings which surround a metropolitan centre of 500,000 or more, and those communities outside a metropolitan centre with more than 100,000 people.

Party platforms summarize all the policies for which parties are trying to persuade their universe of support to vote for. If suburban voters are a contested demographic, then a thematic emphasis on suburban voters should be recognizable in each parties' platform (Flanagan, 2010). I analyze each platform in its entirety over the last four federal elections. In doing so, I look at the intention of each platform and attempt to trace out the thematic prevalence of content related to suburban voters. To codify the latent content I utilize the definition of (sub)urban "as a spatial concentration of people whose lives are organized around non-agricultural activities...whereas rural means any place that is not urban" (Juergens and Rashed, 2010). Some of what is defined as (sub)urban will inevitably overlap with rural self-identification, but what makes it non-rural is its lack of explicit reference to agriculture. Expanding on this, I equate fishing and forestry to agriculture to account for trans-national differences in rurality. To supplement this I also use the definition of suburban put forth by Pratt (1987), who defines suburban voters as middle-class homeowners as a metric of distinction from urban voters. Further, I include the prominence of families, adolescent children, and working mothers into the working distinction of the suburban voter (Bell, 2006 144-45). Therefore, I define the suburban voter as one who considers themselves a member of the middle class, owns/or is looking to own a home, has/looking to have children, and lives on the inner or outer suburbs of a metropolitan area. Using this definition I codify the use of the terms middle class, education, families, housing, and childcare as operationalized indicators of suburban focused rhetoric. Using these indicators I qualify the thematic prevalence of suburban related content in platforms.

<div align="center">**Data**</div>

Leaders' Tours
Of the 91 stops that each of the leaders made during the 2019 campaign on average three out of every five stops were to riding that was codified as suburban. The other two stops were split nearly equally between urban and rural ridings. One exception is Jagmeet Singh who stopped at a significantly higher number of urban ridings (32) compared to the CPC (17) and LPC (11) (CPAC, 2019). The LPC and CPC shared nearly identical numbers in suburban ridings at 58 and 55 stops respectively. This indicates that these two parties have identified the same universe of support. Jagmeet Singh took ten fewer stops in suburban communities (47), but this does not mean suburban voters are not part of the NDP's universe of support. Several potential reasons explain this discrepancy including: finances, mobility, demographics, family status, and his history as a Member of Provincial Parliament in

Ontario for urban riding. These could all potentially explain why it would be more beneficial for Mr Singh to stop in urban centres. I do not discuss this much further, but more research into the NDP campaign strategy would be insightful into that party's relation to suburban voters.

Figure 1.0

Party Leader Tour Stops

RURAL ● URBAN ● SUBURBAN
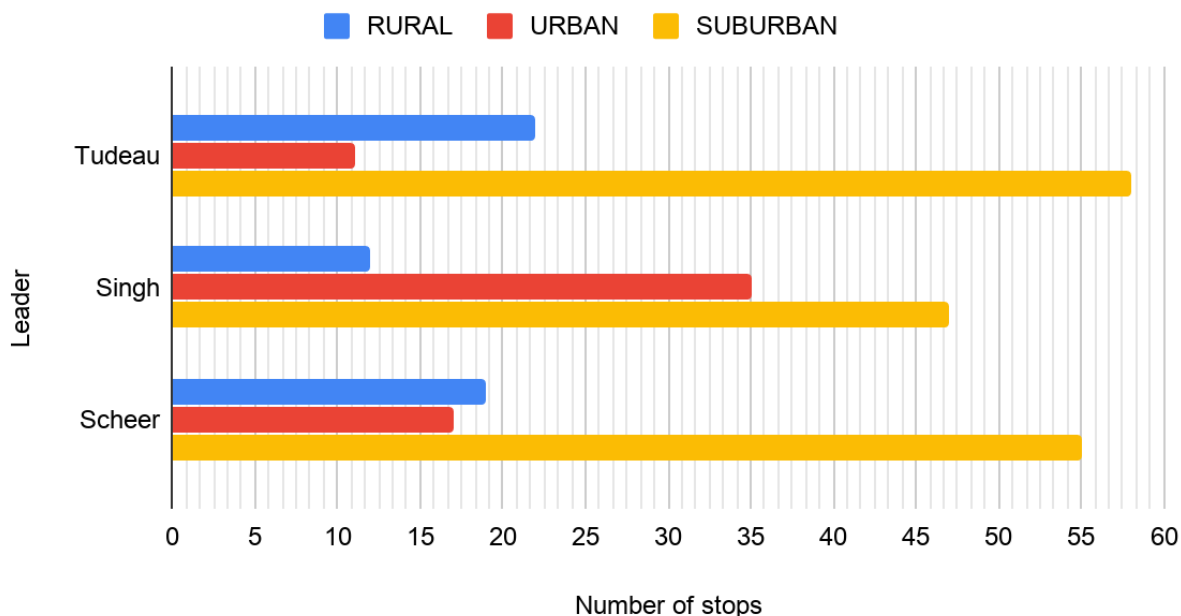
(CPAC, 2019)

Party Platforms

My analysis of party platforms confirms what is suggested by the prevalence of suburban ridings in the leaders' tours. There is a focus on suburban voters. Suburban content manifested itself through several patterns related to the type of messaging, the direction of messaging, and location of policy within the platforms. Since 2011, suburban voters have become a more prominent target for CPC and LPC policy. This focus materialized in 2011 where both parties began to introduce the theme of families and the middle class. This does not hold for the NDP who during the 2015 and 2019 campaigns moved away from a theme of family that was prevalent in 2011 and 2008. This is evident in the platform titles during this time. Suburban voters are the theme of the NDP's platform in 2008 and 2011, and the same for the Liberals in 2011, 2015, 2019 (Figure 2.0).

Figure 2.0

Liberal, Conservative, and NDP Platform Title Pages 2008 -19

Party

Year:	Liberal	Conservative	NDP
2019	"Forward, a Plan For The Middle Class"	"It's Time For You To Get Ahead"	" A New Deal for People"
2015	"Strong Middle Class"	"Our Plan to protect the economy"	"Building a Country of Your Dreams"
2011	"Your Family your Future"	"Here for Canada"	"Giving your Family a Break"
2008	"Richer, Fairer, Greener"	"The True North Strong and Free"	"A Prime Minister on Your Family's Side, For a Change"

(Conservative Party of Canada 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019; Liberal Party of Canada 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019; New Democratic Party 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019)

There is also a clear distinction between the location of themes. The middle class and families are consistently present at the beginning of platforms, but rurality is left until the last third of the platform. Secondly, themes of rurality are always given a separate section. However, these sections are often located within larger sections dedicated to broad based issues (i.e. national security, resource development, foreign policy). Specific issues related to rural communities, such as rural crime, consistently fall to the very end of platforms. I do not discuss this further and focus solely on suburban voters. However, further research into this phenomenon could provide insight into the power dynamics relevant to rural communities.

A shortfall of this data is the absence of manifest content. A quantitative analysis of the mentions of rural, suburban, and urban content could perhaps shed more light on the marketing strategies of each party. However, such an analysis on its own fails to encompass the entirety and focus of each platform. Counting the number of mentions of related key terms is a useful supplement, but it does not always accurately represent the audience. One can discuss families without using the word family. As such, I have omitted a quantitative analysis in favour of a more encompassing thematic analysis.

Discussion

This data demonstrates that the CPC and LPC parties are concentrating their resources on suburban voters. Therefore, suburban voters exist as a persuadable bloc of voters for the CPC and LPC. The NDP, as expected, spent more resources in urban areas and therefore indicates that the NDP does not mainly target suburban voters. Such a conclusion raises the important question of how powerful is the urban vote in shaping

election outcomes? Based on my codification of rural, suburban, and urban ridings it appears that urban ridings are limited in number compared to suburban ridings.

Every city that has urban ridings inherently has several suburban ridings, but not every city with suburban ridings will have urban ridings. Urban voters are electorally outgunned, because of the disproportionate number of suburban ridings. This speaks to a criticism of this analysis. Being more numerous in quantity than urban and rural ridings party leaders would inherently stop in suburban ridings more often. I contend that this claim does not hold in light of the distinct difference in the number of stops in suburban ridings by the NDP. My research suggests that the types of ridings being visited are a conscious choice on behalf of the parties. Further, the number of suburban ridings is not irrelevant to my analysis. Rather it indicates that suburban voters are a numerous and powerful coalition of voters. As such suburban voters can be said to be where elections are won and lost. This is affirmed by the frequency of stops made by party leaders in suburban ridings, and the themes pertaining to suburban voters in their platforms (Flanagan 2010, 158-261; Borden, Perella, and Roy, 2015; Walks 2004, 2004). This conclusion does not directly confirm whether elections are won and lost in the GTA. Rather, it only suggests that elections are won and lost in suburban ridings. However, the GTA and the entirety of the Ontario peninsula sometimes called the 905 consists of 15% of the population of Canada and largely consists of suburban ridings (StatsCan, 2016). Therefore, not only is the GTA crucial in determining election outcomes but the entire 905. This confirms the common assertion that elections are won and lost in the GTA.

This phenomenon is important because it determines who and where matters in elections. Suburban voters do not simply enjoy the focus of campaigns, but they determine what the campaign is going to be about. This is evident in the party platforms. For example, the focus on suburban voters issues, such as housing, made housing a prominent issue for both the CPC and LPC in 2019 (Conservative Party of Canada, 2019; Liberal Party of Canada, 2019). These topics themselves are not inherently problematic, but what is problematic is a select few determining what issues are relevant. Critics may push back and claim that suburban voters exist across Canada and that these issues have trans-regional appeal. Therefore this is not problematic, because Canadians across the country are setting the agenda. I refute this claim by emphasizing that this phenomenon also determines which regions matter. The 905 has a larger population than 11 of the 13 provinces and territories and this gives it more representation than those provinces (StatsCan, 2016). While we do not vote by province or territory it is still crucial to recognize that one region in Canada wields a lot of political power. This allows for issues that may be central or even existential to some provinces to be overlooked without any significant political backlash. This can shut a large portion of Canada out of the political process.

Conclusion

The topic of suburban voters is not simply a matter of where and who parties target, but a critical discussion in how power is distributed in Canada. Therefore, scholarship should pick up on this issue and deepen its analysis. This chapter did not get to explore the conceptions of suburban in great detail. Doing so would further our understanding of this demographic that wields immense power. From this so should the question of what kind of policy and political marketing resonates with these voters be explored, to further our understanding of which issues are crucial to winning elections. As well, an analysis should also be made into other groups of persuadable voters in Canada to broaden our understanding of who matters in elections.

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