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Are politicians democratic realists?

JACK LUCAS,[1] LIOR SHEFFER[2] & PETER JOHN LOEWEN[3]

[1]*Department of Political Science, University of Calgary, Canada;* [2]*School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel;* [3]*Department of Political Science and Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada*

Abstract. Political scientists have long debated whether citizens meet the expectations of a 'folk theory' of democratic representation, in which voters correctly reward and punish politicians for their actions, make choices primarily on the basis of policy preferences and orient their decisions to the future rather than the past. But how do elected politicians themselves theorize voting behaviour? In this paper, we report results from an original survey of more than 2000 elected local politicians in Canada and the United States which allows us to characterize politicians' own democratic theories. We uncover substantial variation in politicians' theories of democracy, and we find examples of a number of well-known theoretical traditions (democratic realism, partisan retrospection, folk theory) among politicians themselves. We also show that politicians' theoretical perspectives are related to how they undertake representation when in office. We conclude with an outline of a comparative research agenda on the causes and consequences of politicians' democratic theories.

Keywords: representation; voting behaviour; democratic theory

Introduction

Democratic responsiveness depends not only on voters' actions but also on politicians' expectations of those voters. Whether politicians campaign on future promises or past accomplishments; whether they focus on concrete policy issues or appeal to voters' identities; whether they follow public opinion or dismiss it as a noisy and irrational signal – all of these choices follow from politicians' own beliefs about voters. What politicians think about voters – their theory of democracy – is likely to shape their behaviour and thus the democratic process itself.

In this paper, we explore politicians' democratic theories and their consequences. We focus on three theoretical axes that have dominated theoretical debates among political scientists in recent decades: policy versus identity voting, myopic versus clear-sighted retrospection and prospective versus retrospective voting. Using data from three surveys of elected politicians, with a combined sample of more than 2000 American and Canadian politicians, we uncover substantial variation in politicians' theoretical perspectives on each of these axes. When we combine these dimensions to identify broader clusters of beliefs, we find that several well-known theoretical traditions, such as folk theory and democratic realism, are commonly held by politicians themselves. Moreover, these theoretical perspectives predict important representational behaviours by politicians.

These findings illustrate the need for political scientists to understand the content and consequences of politicians' democratic theories. In our analysis below, we find that politicians' theoretical perspectives are related to how they allocate their scarce time as representatives. We expect these theories to be related to many other important representational behaviour, including responsiveness to constituents, legislative productivity and choices about how to mobilize voters

during campaigns. We also see a good reason to expect substantial variation in politicians' democratic theories across electoral and legislative institutional contexts, providing an important mechanism connecting institutional environments to representational behaviour. We thus conclude with a call for, and an outline of, a novel comparative research agenda on politicians' theories of democratic politics.

Democratic realism and contemporary theories of democracy

How does representative democracy really work? How do voters choose which candidate or party to support? Why are some governments rewarded with re-election, while others are unceremoniously turfed? These questions have been central to political science research on elections and democracy for more than a century. Nearly every possible answer, from the hopelessly optimistic to the relentlessly cynical, can be found somewhere in the pages of published political science scholarship.

Despite this diversity, many political scientists' answers to core questions about democracy tend to cluster into well-established traditions. In their remarkable 2017 book *Democracy for Realists*, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels helpfully synthesize past research into three general types. The first, which Achen and Bartels (2017) call 'populist' or 'folk' theory, assumes that voters make choices on the basis of parties' or candidates' policy platforms. In spatial voting theory, the most well-developed version of the 'folk theory' tradition, each voter selects a party or candidate whose policy position is closest to the voter's own ideal point. These spatial voters may not know *everything* about the competing parties' policy promises, but they do know enough to make rational choices among the competing alternatives. These voters are *policy-focused*, *future-oriented* and *clear-eyed* in their choices.[1]

A second theoretical approach, which is less well-known outside of political science but extremely popular inside it, is *retrospective voting* (Ferejohn, 1986; Fiorina, 1981; Healy & Malhotra, 2013). In classical retrospective voting theory, voters look to the past, rather than the future, making their voting decisions on the basis of the incumbent government's success or failure at improving their lives or those of their fellow citizens. While this theory requires much less of voters than does spatial voting – it asks only that voters assess how their lives have improved (or not) on matters for which their governments are responsible – it still requires that voters are willing to assess governments' performance over their full term in office (rather than more idiosyncratic recent trends) and that voters can rationally attribute blame and reward to politicians, ignoring life events for which elected politicians have no responsibility. For retrospective voting theorists, then, voters are likely to be *policy focused*, oriented to the *past* rather than the future, and *clear-eyed* in their ability to assess government performance.

Achen and Bartels reject these two theoretical traditions. Their third alternative is itself a theoretical synthesis of past work, supplemented by new conceptual machinery and empirical analysis. On this third theory, which Achen and Bartels call 'group politics' but might more generally be called 'democratic realism', voters are decidedly *unable* to cast prospective spatial votes nor to make clear-eyed retrospective judgements of incumbents. Voters lack the coherent, stable policy preferences necessary for spatial voting and while citizens *do* vote retrospectively, Achen and Bartels insist that their retrospection is *blind* rather than clear-eyed, incorporating events and experiences over which governments could not reasonably be held responsible. Democratic politics, Achen and Bartels argue, is group politics: citizens acquire partisan loyalties by means

of childhood socialization and quasi-random life events (e.g., the government that happens to be in power when bad things occur in their lives), and these durable group loyalties, combined with largely irrational retrospective judgements, determine who wins and who loses elections in contemporary democracies. According to democratic realism, voters are focused on *group identity* rather than policy preferences, and, while democratic realists accept that voting behaviour is *retrospective*, this retrospection is largely *blind* rather than clear-eyed.

Achen and Bartels make no claim to have offered a comprehensive overview of democratic theory in *Democracy for Realists* – indeed, in our conclusion, we will discuss a number of additional theoretical debates that are relevant to a fuller treatment of democratic theory. Even so, as we have already implied, their work provides valuable synthesis of at least three dimensions of theoretical debate that are at the heart of political science theories of democracy: (1) whether voters focus their attention on the *past* or the *future*; (2) whether voters are *clear-eyed* or *blind* in their assessment of their representative's performance; and (3) whether voters tend to focus on *policy preferences* or *group identities* when thinking about their political choices. As we have seen, Achen and Bartels take a 'democratic realist' position on each of these three questions, while folk theory and retrospective voting theory take different positions. While these three axes of debate certainly do not tell us *everything* about an individual's theory of democracy, understanding where they stand on each of the three questions would tell us a great deal about how they think democracy works.

Two valuable features of these theoretical debates are particularly important to keep in mind. First, each of the three theoretical axes remains an area of active and spirited debate in political science research. On prospective versus retrospective voting, there are many who agree that voters are retrospective in their orientation, but a strong contingent of spatial voting theorists continue to offer evidence that prospective spatial judgements play an important role in voters' choices (Jessee, 2012). Some maintain that retrospective voting is often 'blind' (Healy et al., 2010), but others argue that retrospection is often at least *somewhat* more clear-eyed than Achen and Bartels would have us believe (Fowler & Hall, 2018; Healy & Malhotra, 2013). And while an identity-based 'group theory' of voting behaviour is certainly common in contemporary political science (Green et al., 2002; Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017; Mason, 2018), there are still many who insist that voters are more policy-seeking than they might seem, and when faced with a choice between policy alignment and blind partisan loyalty voters are willing to abandon their traditional loyalties to secure their policy preferences (Fowler, 2020; Schonfeld & Winter-Levy, 2021). While political scientists will certainly argue that some of these positions are more plausible than others, what is important for our purposes is that there are many examples, even within the discipline of political science itself, of active arguments on all sides of these debates.

A second key feature of these three theoretical axes of debate is that they are, at least to some degree, orthogonal to each other – that is, a person's position on one of the three debates does not fully determine their position on the others. While all retrospective voting theorists, for instance, would take the 'retrospective' side of the retrospective versus prospective axis, some believe that retrospective voters are policy-oriented (Key, 1966), while others argue that voters' retrospective assessments translate to partisan identities, which are themselves a 'running tally' of retrospective judgements (Fiorina, 1981). Each of the debates that we describe can be conceptualized as a theoretical spectrum, and while some combinations of theoretical positions may be easier to imagine than others, there are no logically impossible positions among the many ways that a person could combine their views on each of the three axes.

In summary, then, *Democracy for Realists* offers an especially valuable – if certainly not fully comprehensive – synthesis of theoretical debates in contemporary democratic theory. Drawing on the three main theoretical traditions that Achen and Bartels identify – folk theory, retrospective theory and democratic realism – we have extracted three major axes of theoretical disagreement: policy versus identity voting, prospective versus retrospective orientation and clear-eyed versus blind retrospection. These dimensions serve as the basis for our measure of politicians' theories of democracy, and they allow us to compare politicians' responses on each axis to common combinations within the theoretical literature in political science.

The case for studying politicians' theories of democracy

Three related sets of elite beliefs are necessary to furnish a satisfactory account of political representation: politicians' *motivations*, their *role perceptions* and their *beliefs about voters*. On the motivations of politicians, there is now a classic and well-explored distinction between office-seeking and policy-seeking politicians, which some have linked to politicians' role perceptions and beliefs about citizens (Caselli & Morelli, 2004; Kitschelt, 2000). Similarly, a long tradition of research has focused on the roles that politicians believe they should play as representatives, which is often organized around concepts of delegates and trustees (Fox & Shotts, 2009) or representational styles (Fenno, 2003). These are important strands of work, and they are supported by good empirical evidence (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 2017).

Research on these first two sets of elite beliefs – motivations and role perceptions – illustrates that politicians' beliefs can strongly shape how they do their jobs as representatives. But they overlook an important third dimension of beliefs: What politicians think about voters. Do politicians believe that voters are collectively wise, able to select the best candidates and able to reward incumbents for good policy outcomes? Or are politicians 'democratic realists' who believe that retrospection is often blind and policy figures little in voters' decisions? In short, what are politicians' theories of democracy? How might *politicians* respond to the theoretical debates we outlined above?

At present, we have few answers to these questions. More than 50 years ago, in an important but neglected study, John Kingdon explicitly sought to describe 'explicit or implicit theor[ies] of voting behavior' among election candidates, with a particular focus on differences between winning and losing candidates (Kingdon, 1967, p. 137). More recent studies have explored politicians' beliefs about the causes of election outcomes and voting behaviour in the Swedish context (Ekengren & Oscarsson, 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2013a) as well as politicians' beliefs about voters' attention to their actions in office (Soontjens, 2022). Strikingly, however, we are aware of no studies that explore elite theories of voting behaviour using (a) methods that enable systematic, comparative analysis of politicians in diverse institutional and electoral settings and (b) focus on the debates about retrospective or prospective voting, myopic or clear-sighted accountability and policy or identity-oriented voting that are at the heart of contemporary debates about and understandings of democratic theory.

This is an important omission because we have good reason to expect that politicians' ideas about the democratic process will shape the way they behave as representatives. In elite politics and public policy, considerable research has shown that 'ideas matter' – politicians' empirical beliefs and expectations shape the priorities they adopt and the policies they choose to pursue (e.g., Hall, 1993; Jacobs, 2011; Lieberman, 2002; Stone, 1989). Moreover, research on political

representation suggests that distinct democratic theories imply varying behavioural responses from politicians; for example, Jane Mansbridge's distinction between 'promissory' and 'anticipatory' representation is premised on the argument that politicians who are operating in a 'promissory' mode will interact very differently from politicians who are operating in an 'anticipatory' mode (Mansbridge, 2003). More recently, the 'constructivist' turn in representation theory has similarly insisted on the importance of politicians' own beliefs for the constituencies they seek to mobilize and represent (e.g., Disch, 2021; Saward, 2010). In short, politicians' theories of democracy are likely to have important consequences for the character of political representation.

What would these theories look like, if politicians did have them? We define a politician's democratic theory as a set of beliefs about the causes of voters' decisions. These theoretical beliefs have three main features (Gopnik, 1988): they are *organizational*, providing conceptual machinery with which to organize empirical phenomena; *predictive*, enabling the development of expectations about individual behaviour and aggregate outcomes; and *explanatory*, implicitly or explicitly providing causal accounts of political action.[2] Like social scientists, when political elites say a candidate was defeated 'because voters are frustrated about the economy' or 'because voters rejected the party's policy agenda', these claims rest on beliefs about the causal processes that drive voting behaviour (Ekengren & Oscarsson, 2013).

These theories are distinct from other ideas and attitudes. Most importantly, they are distinct from politicians' *normative* beliefs about the proper ends of politics. In practice, of course, normative beliefs and democratic theories may be related; normative beliefs have empirical implications, and empirical theories imply that some normative positions are more plausible than others. Still, the two modes of argument are distinguishable, and we focus here on *empirical* democratic theories.[3]

If politicians do hold such theories, we would expect them to have at least two important qualities. First, theories are dynamic: They are subject to change in light of new evidence, persuasive arguments and appealing alternative accounts. While politicians may remain stubbornly attached to theories even in the face of considerable anomalies and contradictions, we would still expect their theories to evolve as they repeatedly submit themselves to voters' judgements and engage in conversation with colleagues, strategists and advisors and certainly to vary between politicians.

The character and extent of this dynamism is an important priority for research on politicians' democratic theories, and while we are not well-placed here to causally assess the different explanations of the sources of politicians' theories, existing literature does point towards some potential factors as likely suspects. For example, politicians' office-seeking ambition, electoral history and prospects and whether or not they hold office should all matter in how their theoretical worldviews evolve, at least to some degree. We might expect incumbents to lean towards a retrospective view of voters' choices, while challengers, who by definition do not have an in-office record, may be motivated to think about voters as prospective. Similarly, those who win office, let alone by large margins, or repeatedly win elections, may find it easier to adhere to a view of voters as being able to ascribe blame and reward fairly, in contrast to those who suffered (or are expecting to suffer) defeat – see Kingdon (1967) for evidence on this relationship. Whether politicians see voters as basing their decisions on identities rather than policy may be in part shaped by partisan and social cleavage structures, by the media landscape, and by levels of affective polarization (Mason, 2018), but it may also have to do with individual politicians' personal success in realizing their policy goals and the degree to which they themselves have clearly defined constituencies.

Ideological dispositions may also be associated with holding certain types of theoretical views – consider, for example, how a populist politician may find it easier to theorize voters as being fair assessors of blame and reward. Finally, politicians' own personal characteristics – being predisposed towards the past or the future, having a strong ideological or social identity – could feature in their theoretical worldviews via projection (Sevenans et al., 2023).

Second, politicians' democratic theories should inform their behaviour. When it comes to campaigning, if politicians believe voters are informed and policy-focused, they should provide voters with information about their policy accomplishments and their policy agenda for the next term (Ekengren & Oscarsson, 2013; Strömbäck et al., 2013b). If they believe instead that voters' judgements reflect 'blind retrospection', we would expect them to put more emphasis on providing voters with upbeat messages about the character of the times – or perhaps to simply ignore attempts at public persuasion and focus on accomplishing whatever they can before the sword of Damocles falls on them. Such theoretical beliefs should also matter for in-office behaviour, and in particular on how politicians choose to spend their time – e.g., focusing on legislation and other forms of policy work versus interacting with constituents. In that regard, there is already some evidence that the substance of policy choices made by politicians depends to a large extent on their theoretical beliefs regarding voters' orientations (Sheffer et al., 2023). Importantly, however, while we would expect to find that politicians' democratic theories have behavioural consequences, we cannot assume that politicians hold specific theories merely on the basis of their revealed behaviour.

Evidence from local politicians in two countries

As a test of the presence and character of politicians' democratic theories, we use data from surveys of elected local politicians in the United States and Canada. In Canada, our data are from the Canadian Municipal Barometer, an annual survey of mayors and councillors in more than 400 municipalities across Canada. We included our democratic theory questions in the 2021 and 2022 annual surveys, with a total of 1517 responses (a 22per cent response rate in 2021 and a 23per cent response rate in 2022). Our sample is well-balanced on observable population characteristics, such as gender, population size and region (see Supplementary Information 7.1). In the United States, we have a total of 581 survey responses from the CivicPulse Spring 2022 Local Policymaker Omnibus Survey, a survey drawn from a random sample of mayors and councillors in U.S. local governments with populations above 1000. Across the two countries, we have 2098 responses – one of the largest surveys of active elected politicians yet conducted.[4]

Local politicians in the United States and Canada provide a useful test bed for this study. Local governments in both countries are responsible for important and contested areas of public policy, oversee substantial budgets and local politicians compete for election in contests that feature meaningful ideological disagreement and incumbent–challenger dynamics that are similar to elections at other levels of government (Lucas, 2021; Lucas & McGregor, 2021; Sances, 2018; Trounstine, 2011). Recent studies suggest that Canadian and American local politicians resemble their state/provincial and federal counterparts in policy responsiveness and political representation (Lucas & Armstrong II, 2021; Schaffner et al., 2020; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014), particularly amidst increasingly partisan and 'nationalized' policy debates in the United States (Hopkins, 2018b; Lee et al., 2023). More generally, many political scientists are increasingly relying on samples of local politicians to understand core features of elite political behaviour (Butler et al., 2017; Butler & Hassell, 2018; Dynes et al., 2023; Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Öhberg & Naurin,

2016; Pereira, 2021; Richardson & John, 2012; Sheffer, 2021; Soontjens & Walgrave, 2023) as well as politicians' theoretical beliefs about deliberative and representative democracy (Heinelt, 2013; Heineilt & Egner, 2022; Vetter et al., 2018). While we expect that local politicians' theories of democracy will differ from politicians in other levels of government, other countries and other institutional and electoral contexts – indeed, as we will suggest, understanding these similarities and differences is central to the comparative research agenda we propose – we also see our study of more than 2000 local politicians as an especially rich data source for an exploratory analysis of politicians' democratic theories.

Local government functions and institutions are similar in Canada and the United States. In both countries, local governments are responsible for a wide range of policy domains, with a particular focus on land use and planning, protective services (police and fire), local utilities (electricity, water, sewage, waste), transportation services (roads, bridges, public transit) and a wide range of local amenities (parks, recreation, libraries, museums). Politicians in nearly all Canadian and American municipalities are elected by plurality in single-member, multi-member or at-large districts.[5] While many municipal elections in both countries are formally non-partisan, meaning that party affiliations are not included on the ballot, voters in both countries nevertheless make use of available partisan and ideological information in their voting decisions (Lucas & McGregor, 2021; Sances, 2018) and many municipal politicians nevertheless hold personal attachments to or memberships in major national political parties. While local electoral institutions in Canada and the United States are different from most European countries (many of which use proportional representation), European municipal governments share many of the same policy functions as their Canadian and American counterparts. The presence of 'independent local lists' in many European local elections – slates of candidates that are not affiliated with national parties – also makes European local politics more similar to the Canadian and American cases than they might at first appear. While we expect that politicians' theories of democracy do vary across countries and electoral institutions, our survey questions and theoretical approach are not idiosyncratic to the Canadian or American cases and can easily be extended to research on political elites in Europe and elsewhere.

As discussed above, we focused our attention on the three theoretical debates described in *Democracy for Realists*: blind versus clear-eyed retrospection, policy-oriented versus identity-oriented voting and retrospective versus prospective voting. We summarize our survey questions, and the theoretical debates they are intended to capture, in Table 1. Our results suggest that respondents understood and were comfortable answering each of the three questions, with very low percentages of respondents selecting 'Don't know' for each question (3, 5 and 2per cent, respectively).[6]

To assess the possible behavioural correlates of politicians' positions on each of these theoretical debates, we used responses on self-reported time allocation from the 2020 Canadian Municipal Barometer survey, which asked respondents to report the number of hours they spent each week on three representational tasks: keeping in touch with constituents (constituent communication), helping constituents with problems (service work) and studying or developing policy and meeting with other policymakers (policy work).[7] These activities are of particular interest to us because they reflect a trade-off between two classic goals that virtually all elected politicians are seeing as having – vote seeking/maximizing the likelihood of re-election (which is most directly achieved through contact with and assistance to constituents) and pursuing ideologically driven policy goals (achieved through spending time on policy/legislative work).

Table 1. Politicians' democratic theories: Question wordings

Debate	Question wording	Minimum value (0)	Maximum value (10)
Clear-sighted versus blind retrospection	Some say that voters often blame or reward politicians for events that are totally outside the politician's control. Others say that voters are good at knowing which events politicians are and are not responsible for. Where would you position yourself in this debate?	Unfairly blame and reward	Fairly blame and reward
Policy versus identity voting	Some say that voters make their decisions based on their policy preferences. Others say that voters' choices have much more to do with their deeply held partisan, ideological or other identities. Where would you position yourself in this debate?	Policy preferences	Deeply held identities
Prospective versus Retrospective voting	Some say that voters make decisions based on candidates' policy commitments and promises for the next term. Others say that voters base their decisions on 'rewarding' or 'punishing' their mayor or councillor for how well they have performed in the previous term. Where would you position yourself in this debate?	Look to the future	Look to the past

Insofar as politicians have theories of voters, they should be reflected in how they pursue these goals. Responses to these items offer a concrete behavioural quantity with which to compare politicians who hold differing theoretical perspectives. We emphasize that Canadian municipal politicians have substantial autonomy in choosing the number of hours they spend on each task: Some choose to emphasize policy work and spend as little time as possible on other tasks, while others minimize policy responsibilities and maximize time on service and communication work. In total, we have 444 responses available for this second analysis.

Results 1: Are politicians democratic realists?

We begin with an overview of politicians' positions on the three theoretical debates described above. Figure 1 summarizes the distributions for the three questions, with Canadian politicians in the first row and American politicians in the second row; mean values and 95per cent confidence intervals are provided in the top corner of each panel. Looking across all of the distributions, we find that each of the three theoretical debates is indeed a *debate* among elected politicians,

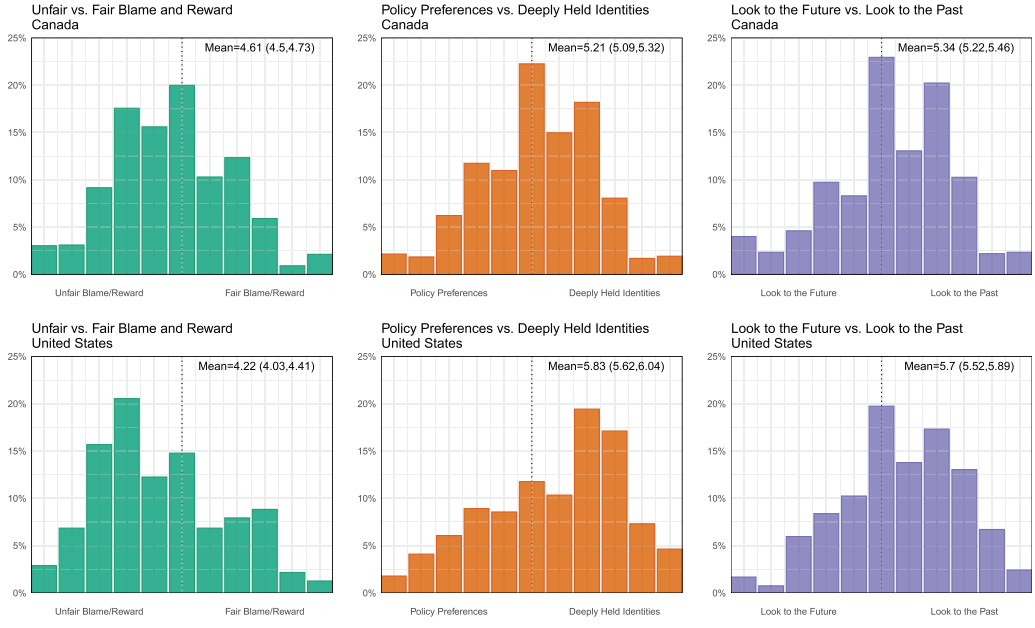

Figure 1. Distribution of politicians' responses to theory questions, by country. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

with responses distributed across the full 0–10 range for each question. In both countries, mean values for the three distributions (reported in the top corner of each panel, along with 95per cent confidence bounds) reflect an overall tendency towards democratic realism: unfair blame (4.61 in Canada, 4.22 in the United States), identity-oriented voting (5.21 in Canada, 5.83 in the United States) and retrospective rather than prospective voting (5.3 in Canada, 5.7 in the United States). While the 95per cent confidence intervals in each panel confirm that these mean values are significantly distant from the centre of the distribution (5), the overall distributions clearly reflect a wide variety of theoretical positions rather than convergence on one theoretical position.

Figure 1 also reveals some interesting differences between our Canadian and American respondents. On all three questions, American respondents appear to lean more strongly towards democratic realism than their Canadian counterparts, with fewer respondents selecting the 'mixed' option at the centre of the distribution and a more noticeable overall tendency towards unfair blame and identity-oriented voting. We return to these differences below.

In Figure 2, we summarize the relationships among the three items, once again summarising Canadian respondents in the first row and American respondents in the second. We provide the correlation coefficient, along with the statistical significance of the correlation, in the top corner of each panel. Most of the correlations are significantly different from zero, but the size of all of the relationships is substantively small. While elected politicians hold positions on *each* of the three theoretical debates, their positions on one debate are only weak predictors of their position on the others.

These theoretical positions vary only modestly by political party. In Figure 3, we summarize politicians' average positions on each of the three theoretical questions, organized by the political

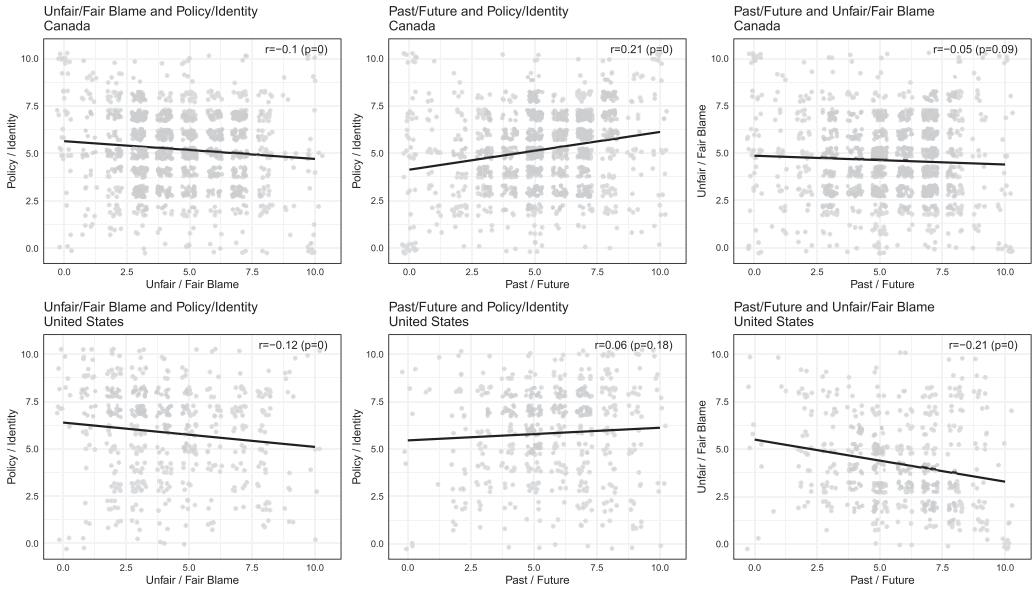

Figure 2. Correlation between items, by country.

party with which the politician identifies (as these are municipal politicians, some are non-partisan independents). In each panel, we organize respondents by country, with Canadian politicians in red and American politicians in blue; to reveal possible ideological patterns in the data, we organize the parties from right to left within each country. On average, at least, politicians' responses are consistent across parties: all politicians lean in the direction of identity-based voting (top panel), retrospective voting[8] (middle panel) and unfair blame (bottom panel). We also see little evidence of clear ideological variation in the figure: with the exception of the policy/identity voting distinction in the United States – where Democrats incline more strongly to identity-based voting than Republicans – there are few clear ideological differences across parties. Perhaps the most obvious differences, in fact, are related not to party or ideology but to *country*: American politicians incline more sharply to identity-based voting, retrospective voting and unfair blame than do Canadian politicians.[9]

While the results in Figure 3 suggest that politicians' overall inclinations are similar across parties and countries, we know from Figures 1 and 2 that the overall averages hide substantial variation in politicians' theoretical positions. Elected politicians in both countries combine their responses across the three countries in a wide variety of ways.[10] Table 2 summarizes the 10 most common combinations of theoretical perspectives in the Canadian Municipal Barometer responses. To construct the table, we simplified each question response into three categories (0–4 for one side of the debate, 5 for a 'mixed' position and 6–10 for the other side) and then combined the three responses to capture each respondent's overall theoretical position. Each of the 27 possible combinations of theoretical positions is held by at least 1per cent of respondents, confirming once again that elected representatives can combine their positions on the three debates in diverse ways.

Despite this diversity, the 10 most common theoretical perspectives, summarized in Table 2, are strikingly familiar from contemporary political science debates, and they account for two-thirds of respondents. The most common position, held by 16.6per cent of respondents, is democratic

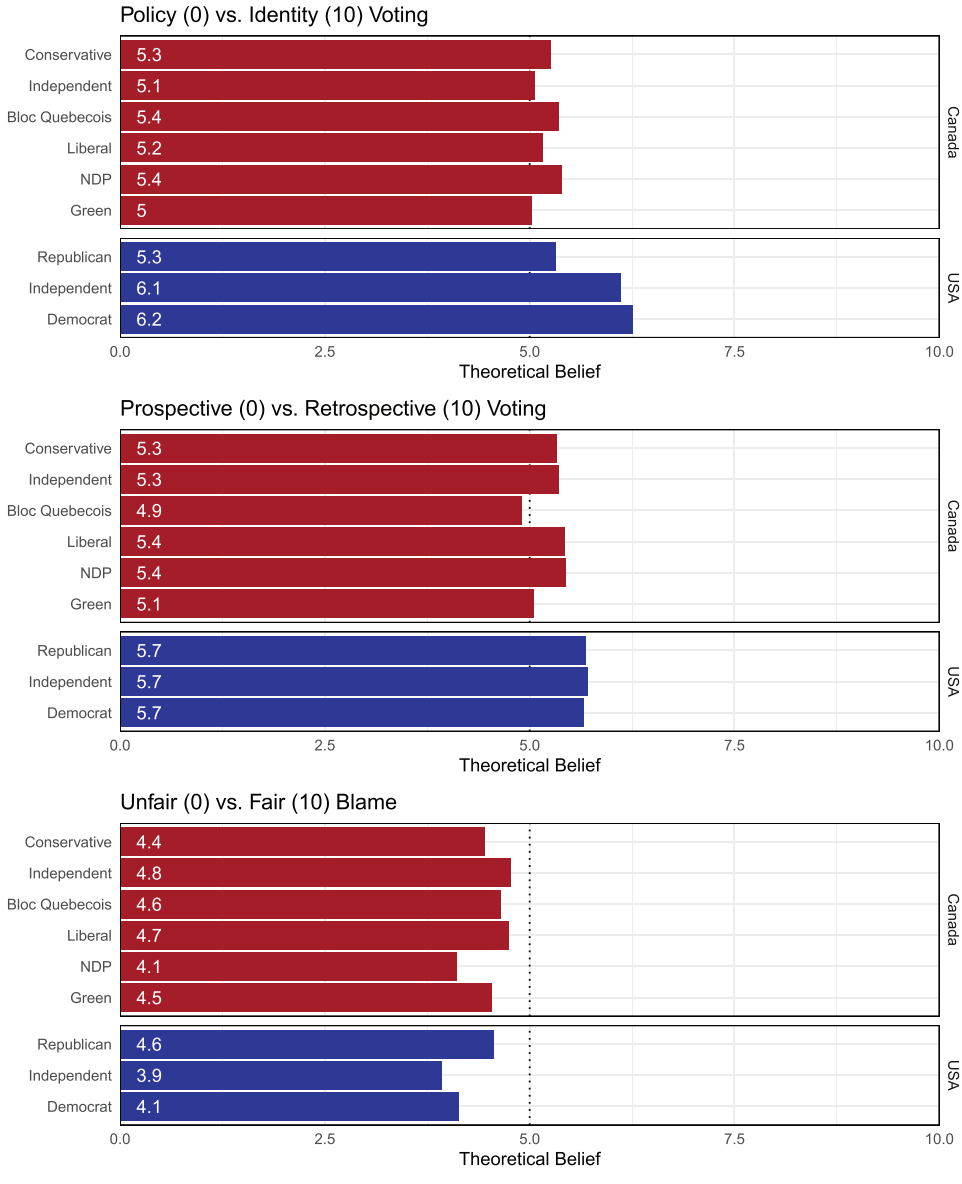

Figure 3. Average theoretical positions, by party identification. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

realism: unfair blame, identity voting and retrospection. Another 17.8per cent of respondents can be characterized as 'weak' democratic realists, endorsing the 'unfair blame' position along with at least one other democratic realist position. In total, then, more than a third of the politicians in our sample hold positions that either fully embrace or incline towards democratic realism.

While democratic realism is most common among both Canadian and American respondents, the two final columns in Table 2 reveal that American local politicians are much more likely than Canadian local politicians to embrace the democratic realist position. Nearly a quarter of American

Table 2. Politicians' theoretical positions: Ten most common combinations

Type	Subtype	Blame	Identity	Time	*N*	Pooled	Canada	USA
Realism	Democratic realism	Unfair	Identity	Past	298	16.6%	13.8%	23.3%
	Weak realism 1	Unfair	Policy	Past	131	7.3%	6.5%	9.1%
	Weak realism 2	Unfair	Identity	Future	94	5.2%	4.8%	6.3%
	Weak realism 3	Unfair	Identity	Mixed	96	5.3%	4.6%	7.2%
Retrospection	Identity retrospection	Fair	Identity	Past	164	9.1%	10.0%	7.0%
Folk theory	Folk theory 1	Unfair	Policy	Future	107	6.0%	6.3%	5.1%
	Folk theory 2	Fair	Policy	Future	89	5.0%	5.6%	3.4%
Mixed	Mixed	Fair	Policy	Past	88	4.9%	4.9%	4.9%
	Mixed	Fair	Identity	Future	71	4.0%	3.1%	6.1%
	Mixed	Unfair	Mixed	Past	66	3.7%	4.1%	2.7%

respondents accept all three democratic realist positions, and when we add the 'weak realism' combinations, the percentage rises to 46per cent. In other words, nearly half of the politicians in our American sample fully or partly embrace the democratic realist account of a blindly retrospective and identity-oriented American voter.

Most of the subsequent combinations in Table 2 are equally recognizable from empirical democratic theory. The second most common combination, which we call 'identity retrospection', concurs with democratic realism on identity-oriented retrospective voting but is more optimistic about voters' ability to accurately punish and reward politicians – a position akin to the partisan retrospection theory of Morris Fiorina (1981). Two variants of folk theory are also popular among politicians: one (row 5) endorses prospective voting and the other (row 6) supports retrospective voting, but both support the folk theory vision of a well-informed and policy-oriented electorate. Three mixed positions complete the top 10 combinations we observe in the data.

Taken together, we see three important implications in these results. First, politicians in both countries *do* have beliefs about the character of citizens' political behaviour that political scientists would describe as 'theoretical' beliefs. We find considerable variation in responses to all three of the questions we asked; responses cover the full possible range for each individual question, and when we combine positions across the three questions, each of the 27 possible combinations is held by at least 1per cent of respondents. Elected politicians do not uniformly embrace a single theory of democracy. Third, despite the wide variation in politicians' theoretical positions, the most common position of the 27 possible combinations is democratic realism: about one in seven Canadian politicians and one in four American politicians endorsed the full suite of realist positions in their survey responses.

While we can only speculate on why the democratic realist view is more prevalent among American politicians compared to their Canadian counterparts, we see some potential reasons in existing literature. First, the high levels of ideological and affective polarization in the American political system – and specifically among politicians (see Enders, 2021; Theriault, 2008) – might be in part accountable to American politicians having a more cynical view of voters, such as seeing them as guided by deeply held identities or unfairly blaming politicians. Second, local politics in the United States are increasingly 'nationalized' on both issues and party brands (Hopkins, 2018a),

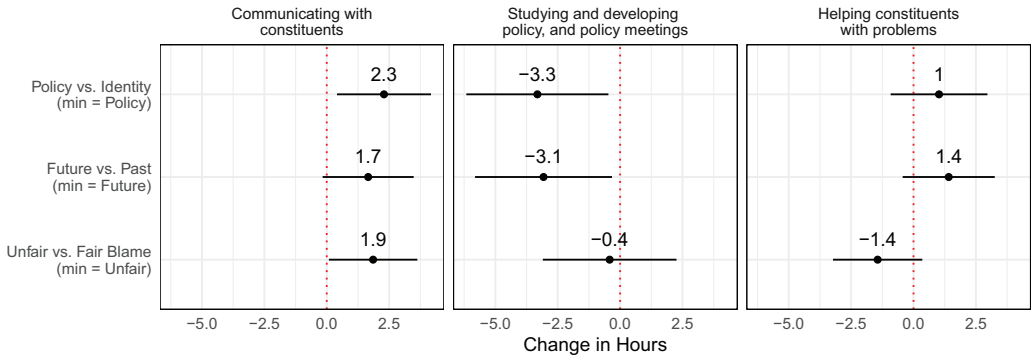

Figure 4. Theoretical positions and hours allocation. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

further suggesting that such dynamics should have implications for how municipal representatives operate and theorize on voters. Finally, other potential factors contributing to this difference may include a different composition of political ideologies among politicians in the United States and Canada, which may map onto theories of voters (a possibility that we intend to explore in future work) or differences between American and Canadian politicians in their past career backgrounds and trajectories.

Results 2: Are politicians' theories reflected in their in-office behaviour?

We now turn to the behavioural correlates of politicians' democratic theories. As we explained above, we focus on a decision over which municipal politicians have considerable autonomy: how to allocate time among competing representational tasks.[11] Figure 4 summarizes the relationship between time allocation and theoretical positions for each theoretical variable and representational task. Each coefficient in the figure is drawn from a distinct Ordinary Least Squares regression analysis, which includes a control for the total number of hours a respondent spent on all three tasks.[12] We have rescaled the 'theoretical debate' variables to range between zero and one.

The results in Figure 4 suggest that politicians' theoretical perspectives are meaningfully related to their work as elected representatives. Representatives who believe voters are identity-oriented report spending more time on constituent communication tasks, and less time on policy development, than politicians who believe citizens are policy-oriented. Similarly, politicians who see voters as retrospective in orientation spend more time on communication and less time on policy development than politicians who see voters as prospective policy-seekers.[13] Communication activity is also higher among politicians who see voters as fair assessors of their performance.

In general, then, we find evidence that politicians' theories of voting behaviour are related to their choices about how they spend their time as representatives in theoretically salient and intuitive ways. These results demonstrate the existence, in local politics, of a link between elected officials' abstract theoretical positions and their concrete, measurable time allocation decisions while in office. We are certainly not suggesting that there is a single direction of causation in this relationship – politicians' theories may affect how they spend their time, but it is also possible that politicians who spend their time on different tasks tend to develop distinct theories of voters.

Instead, this brief analysis is intended to illustrate that politicians' theories of democracy are meaningfully connected with their action in office.

Conclusion: Outlining a new research agenda

Our findings suggest that politicians hold meaningful democratic theories. A substantial fraction of politicians in both Canada and the United States – but especially so in the latter – are 'democratic realists' who believe voters are retrospective, unfairly allocate credit and blame and vote on the basis of deeply held identities. A smaller but nevertheless substantial share subscribes to folk theory, believing voters assign blame fairly and make choices primarily on the basis of their policy preferences. These theoretical beliefs are correlated with choices about how to undertake political representation. We thus see evidence in these findings that politicians not only vary in their democratic theories but also that these theoretical positions are related to their behaviour as representatives.

These findings lay the groundwork for an important new research agenda on the causes and consequences of political elites' democratic theories. We see at least four important and intersecting priorities for this research agenda. First, we need to better understand how elite theories relate to a wider range of elite behaviour, including legislative activity, campaigning styles and role perceptions. For instance, we would expect politicians who believe voters are policy-oriented to be motivated to increase their legislative output and to be more responsive to public opinion on substantive issues, compared to those who see voters as identity-driven. Beliefs about voters' past/future outlook, blame attribution and identity should also translate into the campaigning choices politicians make during election cycles – such as their rhetoric, framing and their substantive issue focus.

Second, understanding when and how politicians come to hold particular democratic theories, and how they evolve as politicians accumulate experience in office, would also be valuable. Do politicians of different ideological convictions, social backgrounds or electoral standing also hold different democratic theories? What kinds of events or experiences prompt politicians to refine their theories? Both qualitative and quantitative research will be helpful to answer these questions. Related to this line of inquiry is the link we already document between politicians' theoretical perspectives and their in-office behaviour – in the case outlined here, how they choose to allocate their time between constituency service, communication and policy work. These findings underscore the importance of disentangling the causal relationship between politicians' theoretical perspectives and their experiences and choices in office: It could be that politicians' theories are stable and help shape their representational preferences and choices once elected. But it is also possible that those same theories are shaped by what politicians do, either for strategic reasons (altering one's view of voters to match in-office constraints or preexisting goals) or because of acquired experience that changes a politician's theoretical outlook.

Third, we see considerable value in extending our analysis to a larger range of theoretical debates. While the three theoretical axes we have discussed are crucial for democratic theory, they are not exhaustive. Existing work has already pointed out additional sources of theoretical variance, such as politicians' perspectives on voters' preferences for individualistic or collective constituency service and their views on the benefits of programmatic policies (Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014). Other work has looked at how politicians theorize the sources of electoral success and voter responsiveness to campaign messages and election promises (Deschouwer &

Depauw, 2014; Ekengren & Oscarsson, 2013; Strömbäck et al., 2013a). Future research might also investigate politicians' positions on 'pocketbook' versus sociotropic voting, fixed versus thermostatic policy preferences or party-centred versus leader-centred voting, among others, providing a more complete picture of politicians' democratic theories. Political scientists may even wish to extend our approach to other theoretical debates, such as theories of the policy process, theories of the character of political bargaining or principal-agent theories of the relationship between elected officials and the public service.[14]

Our results have obvious limitations. Perhaps most importantly, our data rely on samples of sitting local politicians. While our data are drawn from two countries – Canada and the United States – that have distinct histories, systems of government and political characteristics (e.g., differences in levels of partisan polarization and partisan attachment, including at the local level), we nevertheless focus exclusively on elected representatives whose lived experiences and responsibilities differ from politicians at higher levels of government. Partisan elections feature predominantly in American local politics and are also a feature of many Canadian localities, but even when they are present, it is unclear whether partisan competition has the same effects in local elections as in national politics (Anzia, 2021), and its relationship to the evolution and outcomes of politicians' theories of democracy is yet unknown. Despite the value and strengths of data from local politicians, and the increasing use of data from local government elites in many studies of elite behaviour, these institutional and contextual differences mean that we must be cautious about generalizing our findings to other legislative contexts.

Despite this limitation, our measurement framework is designed to extend easily beyond the local context, enabling direct comparisons of politicians' theories across countries and levels of government. This leads to the fourth and final element of our proposed research agenda: a rigorous, comparative extension of the work we have undertaken here. Clarifying how politicians' theories vary in multi-party versus single-party systems, proportional and majoritarian electoral systems or more and less polarized political environments can help to clarify not only the causes of politicians' democratic theories themselves but also the ways politicians' democratic theories may serve as a mechanism connecting electoral institutions to political behaviour and outcomes. A fully comparative research agenda on politicians' democratic theories, incorporating many relevant theoretical debates, diverse methodological and measurement approaches and comparing across varying institutional and political contexts has the potential, in our view, to offer important insights into the democratic implications of politicians' theories of the voters they represent.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

Table 1: Provincial Representation: Population and Sample
Table 2: Gender Representativeness: Population and Sample
Table 3: Population Representativeness: Population and Sample
Table 4: Representativeness: Civic Pulse Sample
Table 5: Behavioural Implications: Full Tables (A)
Table 6: Behavioural Implications: Full Tables (B)
Table 7: Behavioural Implications: Full Tables (C)
Figure 1: Time Allocation: Descriptive Overview
Figure 2: Democratic Theories: Comparison of Citizens and Politicians
Data S1

Notes

1. We define 'clear-eyed' and 'blind' retrospection in more detail below; in general, the term refers to the assumption that voters can correctly ascribe blame and reward to politicians for their actions.
2. The 'intuitive theory' or 'folk theory' literature has been helpful for our thinking about politicians' theories of democracy. (See Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1998; Gelman and Legare, 2011; Morris et al., 2001.) We have also been influenced by political science research on the causal beliefs and normative principles that animate elite and mass behaviour (e.g., Lieberman, 2002; Stone, 1989), along with a rich scholarship on how specific policy trajectories have been shaped by elite theories (Hall, 1993). In international relations, Kertzer and McGraw (2012) have also explored if citizens hold attitudes that would incline them towards a 'realist' interpretation of the international arena.
3. A number of studies have explored politicians' normative theories of representative democracy and governance, including recent work on local politicians in Europe. (See, for example, Egner et al., 2022; Heineilt & Egner, 2022; Heinelt, 2013; Vetter et al., 2018.)
4. All surveys were completed online via the Qualtrics survey platform. We note that local politicians have extremely limited staff support in all but the biggest cities, making it very unlikely that others completed the survey on the politician's behalf. Follow-up interviews with politicians in 2021 as well as email interaction with dozens of Canadian politicians during the field period provided strong additional evidence that politicians were completing the surveys themselves. For more information on the Canadian Municipal Barometer, see http://www.cmb-bmc.ca. For more information on CivicPulse, see https://www.civicpulse.org.
5. Some American municipalities used ranked ballot counting systems, but no municipalities in Canada or the United States use proportional representation.
6. We acknowledge that we could reduce measurement error by measuring each axis of debate using multiple items. Unfortunately, space constraints in our elite surveys made this impossible. However, we note that respondents in our American survey had the opportunity to provide feedback on our questions in open-ended follow-up questions; none of the 115 individuals who provided feedback in this open-ended follow-up expressed concern with the questions. The feedback did offer interesting additional context (e.g., respondents clarified that they were thinking of voters in their own community, rather than voters in general) but provided no reason to believe that respondents were confused by or misunderstood our questions.
7. Note that this is a subset of the larger sample used for our first set of results.
8. While the average among Bloc Québecois politicians is just below five, we have few politicians with this partisan identity in our data, and the difference between Bloc Québecois politicians and the other minor party (the Greens) is not statistically significant.

9. These differences are statistically significant; compared to Canadian politicians, American politicians lean more towards unfair blame (0.4 point difference $p < 0.01$), retrospective voting (0.4 point difference, $p < 0.01$) and identity voting (0.6 point difference, $p < 0.01$).
10. In the Supporting Information, we provide a preliminary comparison of democratic theories among politicians and ordinary citizens, using data from a nationally representative survey of Canadians. We hope to explore the politician–citizen comparison in more detail in cross-national comparative research in the future.
11. We remind readers that this analysis is limited to the subset of Canadian politicians who were asked about their time allocation decisions.
12. In the Supporting Information, we provide full tables as well as models that add each politician's ideology, age and gender as controls. Findings in the models with controls are identical to the main text models, with the partial exception of communication with constituents; in those models, additional uncertainty in estimates with controls means that the 'fair vs. unfair blame' and 'identity vs. policy' relationships, while identical in direction and similar in magnitude, are no longer statistically significant.
13. The first of these relationships is statistically significant at $p < 0.1$. We also note that ascribing voters identity orientation retrospection is weakly associated with spending more time on helping constituents with problems, but these patterns do not meet conventional levels of statistical significance. While this may reflect an absence of a relationship (e.g., owing to a social desirability bias on this item), it may also be a result of insufficient power to significantly detect effects of this size.
14. These additional theories, while important in political science, focus on areas of politics with which some politicians may not engage; for instance, some politicians may interact little with the public service or serve in governments with little foreign policy role. In contrast, democratic theories deal with election-related beliefs that virtually every elected representative is likely to have developed and should thus be applicable in a wide range of political contexts and representative roles.

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Address for correspondence: Jack Lucas, Department of Political Science, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada. Email: jack.lucas@ucalgary.ca