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Uncontested: A Case Study Exploring the Effects of Long-Term Incumbency in Sarnia, Ontario

Rebecca Hay for INDS-1108, November 17, 2019

Abstract

Mike Bradley has been the mayor of the City of Sarnia since 1988 and is the second-longest serving mayor in Ontario. In 2018, he won yet another municipal election with a whopping 64.4% of the vote. Although voter turnout and high margin election wins would suggest residents are pleased with their mayor of 31 years, recent census statistics point to unaddressed problems. This case study aims to explore the effect that long-term mayoral incumbency has had on municipal public engagement in the City of Sarnia and whether the 2018 mayoral election is a true reflection of voter sentiments.

Introduction & Background

Sarnia is a city located in southwestern Ontario at the cusp of Lake Huron, boasting long stretches of sandy beach, beautiful woodland trails, and convenient natural harbours. The city's geography is poised for considerable opportunity in business and manufacturing; proximity to the United States being a distinct advantage. Since the 1960s, Sarnia has been home to what's known as "Chemical Valley" – a bustling industrial park of more than 60 chemical production plants (Toledano, 2013). But, however rich in opportunity Sarnia appears to be on the surface, recent statistics indicate the city hasn't lived up to its expectations.

In 2016, Sarnia had a population of 71,594 people, down 1.1% from 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2016). The population has been either static or declining for more than a decade, losing a small percentage of its working population every census cycle. By contrast, the province of Ontario's population *increased* in the same time period by 4.6% (Statistics Canada, 2016). In fact, Sarnia has lost more than 2,700 residents since 1991 when its population was at its peak of 74,376 (Statistics Canada, 2011).

In addition, the census data demonstrates that younger, pre-retirement aged residents are the ones leaving: 21.7% of Sarnia's population is 65 years of age or older, compared to the provincial average of 16.7% and the median age of residents in 2016 was 45.6 (Statistics Canada, 2016), up from 44.8 in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2011). There are more seniors living in Sarnia than children under 15 (Statistics Canada, 2016).

It's possible that Sarnia's negative population growth has something to do with the unemployment rate sitting at 9.2% (Statistics Canada, 2016). Despite the advantageous locale, Sarnia has been unable to grow its industrial sector since the dawn of the 1990s; while business had been booming in the 60s and 70s, several chemical plants either reduced their workforce or had moved out altogether by the mid-90s (Morden, 2016). Those lost jobs were never replaced, and the city's unemployment rate has scarcely recovered since (Statistics Canada, 2016). While the blame for the loss of industry can be placed on the economy of the times (Celasun & Gruss, 2018), Sarnia's unemployment rate has climbed *even higher* since the 2008 recession, (Kula, 2017) signifying the city's glaring inability to stimulate the job market in other sectors.

Increased unemployment also brings increased rates of crime and homelessness (Fotheringham et al., 2016). In 2018, Sarnia's crime rate was 6,977.58 incidents per 100,000 people, with Ontario's rate at just 4,486.94 – a 55.5% difference (Statistics Canada, 2019). Local newspapers make frequent reports of drug-related crime, indicating a city-wide substance abuse epidemic. Although the rate has decreased from previous years, drug-related crime in Sarnia still happens at a rate 75.9% higher than the provincial average (Statistics Canada, 2019). In addition, the city has just two homeless shelters and both are frequently running at capacity (Shantz, 2019). One such shelter was on the verge of shutting down, threatening the well-being of the homeless individuals it housed. Sarnia City Council spent more than \$160,000 in legal fees trying to force River City Vineyard, a church and homeless shelter with a capacity of 25 beds, to close its doors and rezone the building (Mathewson, 2015). The case went to the

Ontario Superior Court and lost, allowing the shelter to continue operations unfettered (Mathewson, 2015). This deeply unpopular legal fight was championed by Anne Marie Gillis, one of Bradley's contenders for mayor in 2018 (Mathewson, 2015).

Mike Bradley has been mayor of Sarnia since 1988 and holds the second-longest mayoral incumbency in all of Ontario. His undefeated government in a stagnant city begs an important question: if Sarnia is doing so poorly under Bradley's watch, why is he still winning elections? Bradley swept the 2018 election with 64.4% of the vote share – the next opponent far behind at just 30% (Ovens, 2018). Voter turnout over the years has been on par with other Ontario municipalities (Ovens, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2015) and even jumped significantly in 2018 with the implementation of a new online voting system (Pin, 2018). Though Bradley denies that the online system was the reason for the spike in turnout (Pin, 2018), studies conducted in Ontario show that online voting has an especially positive impact on voter turnout (Goodman & Spicer, 2019). So, if turnout isn't the problem, have residents just become accustomed to voting for a familiar face? Has Bradley's epic incumbency ultimately dampened voter engagement in municipal affairs? This research aims to explore the effect that long-term mayoral incumbency has had on municipal public engagement in the city of Sarnia and whether the 2018 mayoral election is a true reflection of voter sentiments.

Literature Review

It is important to first define the term "public engagement" to gain an understanding of the research. According to Jennifer Lake, Ec.D., public engagement is a "means

through which members of the public become more informed about and/or influence public decision” and she lists *information, consultation, participation, and problem solving* as the four key forms (Lake, 2014). Public engagement describes the methods used to motivate a voting population (Lake, 2014). In the perspective of this research, this definition may include the distribution of information to the voting public, the lengths at which the candidates have gone to consult voters on their opinions, voter turnout in debates and elections, and the ability for candidates and voters alike to identify and solve problems (Lake, 2014).

Method

This research into Sarnia’s public engagement was conducted by surveying residents from varying demographics, areas of the city, and at different times of the day.

Researchers went door-to-door and issued the survey electronically via Survey Monkey. Sarnia voters were given a brief, verbal introduction to the research project and asked if they would like to participate.

Participants were permitted to use a tablet device or their own phones to read a Statement of Informed Consent and fill out 9 questions. The answers remained completely anonymous and the entire process took approximately 4-5 minutes for participants to complete. The questions focused on four key areas:

- Perceived levels of political knowledge
- Confidence in Sarnia’s direction
- The biggest influence on votes in the 2018 election

- Opinions identifying areas of improvement

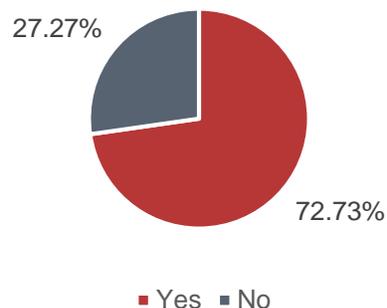
The survey also asked participants whether they were born in Sarnia. This question acts as a control to test for representation accuracy. The final question challenges Sarnia voters' loyalty to Mayor Mike Bradley, asking them if they would vote for a viable challenger if a candidate offered the improvements they listed.

The survey reached out to 40 residents and successfully interviewed 22 participants – a 55% participation rate. Being an exploratory survey, the goal was to identify potential effects of long-term incumbency and possible causes for the political environment, not to provide concrete statistics on voter opinions. The research ultimately helps to shed a light on Sarnia's propensity to elect its long-standing mayor.

Results & Discussion

73% of the survey participants reported that they were born in Sarnia (*Figure 1*).

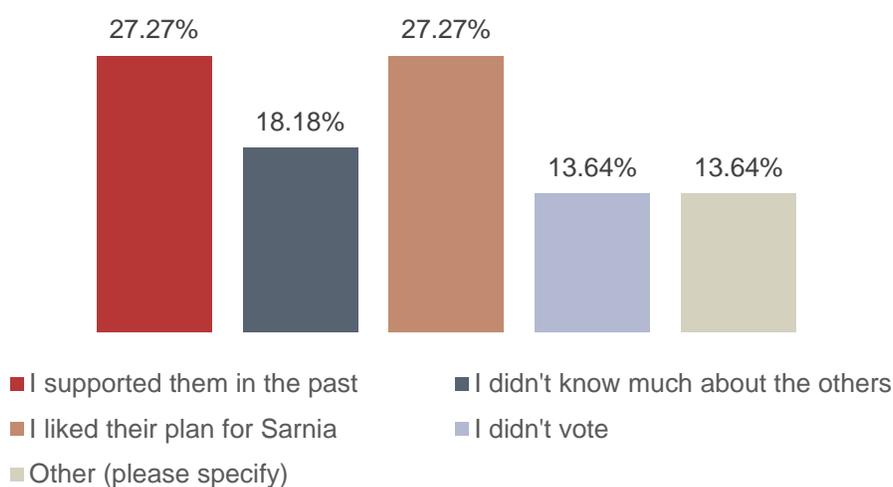
Figure 1: "Were you born in Sarnia?"



27% of participants said that the biggest influence on their vote was that they supported them in the past. That's the same percentage of people who said that they voted because they liked the candidates' plan (*Figure 2*). This is an important distinction

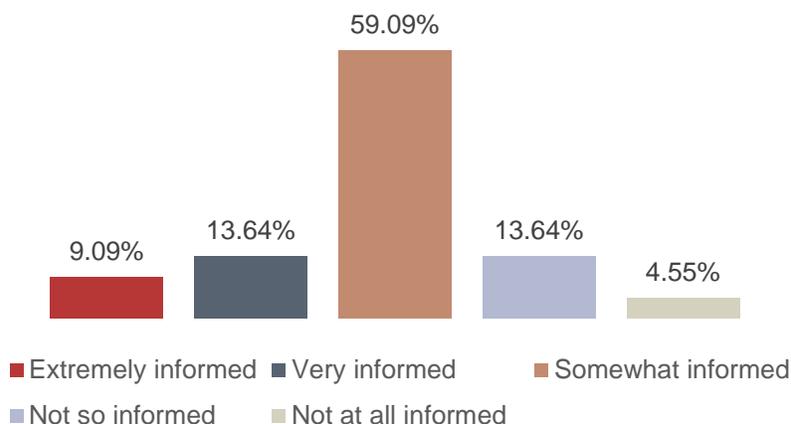
because it signifies residents are not necessarily voting because they subscribe to a particular platform. In fact, most of the participants chose an answer that reflects a level of distaste for their chosen candidate. For instance, some didn't vote at all, and some even wrote in Other responses, such as "the alternative sucked" and "the others were terrible candidates". It appears many voters are just choosing the best of a bad crowd.

Figure 2: "What was the biggest influence on your vote in the 2018 election for mayor?"



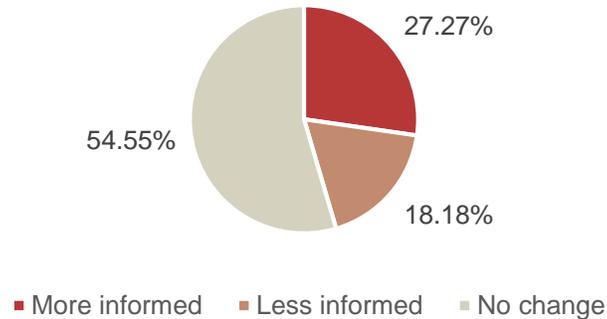
Government depends on an engaged public to make the best decisions on their behalf (Lake, 2014). Voters need to be informed and enfranchised in order to elect the candidate that best serves their interests; an informed populous leads to a healthy democracy and a more engaged voter base (Lake, 2014). Most of the survey participants reported themselves as being at least somewhat informed on Sarnia's municipal politics and only one participant admitted they were not at all informed (*Figure 3*). It appears Sarnia is doing a fair job of distributing election information to the relevant audiences and thus increasing voter knowledge according to the observable data.

Figure 3: "How informed are you on Sarnia's politics?"



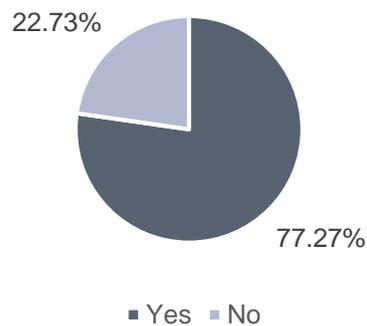
Because 2018 was the first time Sarnia had ever used the new system of voting (voters had the option of voting online or by telephone in lieu of traditional polling stations), it was important for the survey to note any changes in voter knowledge of candidates as a result of the new system compared to previous years. Most of the participants noticed no such change, but many reported that they became more informed as a result of the new system (*Figure 4*). Ergo, because it became easier to vote, those who might not have sought information on the 2018 election decided to do so this time around. This uptick in knowledge points to an improved level of engagement from previous elections, thanks to the new voting system. The minority of participants who reported that they became less informed after the implementation of online voting could have felt alienated by the new technology, demotivated by the absence of political camaraderie at polling stations or simply disappointed by the change of process and thus unwilling to seek information.

Figure 4: "Do you think the new online voting system led you to be more or less informed about candidates' platforms?"



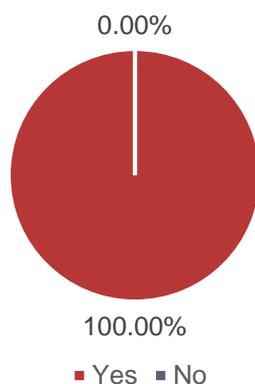
An overwhelming majority of participants also reported that they would like to be more involved in Sarnia's decision-making (*Figure 5*). Voters want to be heard, they are willing to participate, and they want to be in the driver's seat.

Figure 5: "Would you like to be more involved in Sarnia's decision-making?"



However optimistic the level of engagement, though, participants report being only somewhat or not so confident in the direction Sarnia is going (*Figure 6*). Nobody reports being extremely confident and few report being very confident. This goes back to the idea that Sarnia residents are perhaps voting for a candidate they don't necessarily

Figure 9: "If a viable candidate was promising the improvements you listed, would you vote for them as a challenger to Mayor Mike Bradley?"



Mike Bradley's plan—which was mostly focused on the city's debt reduction, office politics, and keeping the status quo (Kula, 2018)—doesn't match up with sentiments of the survey participants, who are consistent in correctly identifying Sarnia's critical issues. There exists a disconnect between candidate platforms and the changes voters want to see, indicating a lack of consultation on the part of the candidates – an important component in the definition of public engagement (Lake, 2014). Anne Marie Gillis, the second-place candidate in the 2018 election, emphasized the need for leadership change but it was partly due to a scandal that plagued Sarnia City Hall in recent years (Kula, 2018). Mike Bradley was accused of verbally harassing councillors and was forced to concede much of his control (Gee, 2016). He had to operate with restricted hours and limited access to City Hall; a physical wall was built to keep him separated from his complainants (Kula, 2016). Gillis was a member of the city council, appointed to act as an intermediary between Bradley and the other councillors (Morden, 2018). Voters may have felt she played too big of a role in the dysfunction and chose

not to take the risk, but her loss could have also been due to her advocacy for the closure of the River City Vineyard homeless shelter. Regardless of the baggage, voters decided she did not measure up. Furthermore, only one out of the three opponents showed up to an important debate during the campaign, the others not even acknowledging the requests for their appearance (Kula, 2018). Residents notice this lack of oppositional energy and tend to vote accordingly (Pin, 2018).

Conclusion

From the research conducted, it seems the city of Sarnia, Ontario has a relatively engaged public. Residents are aware of Sarnia's issues and are willing to vote for someone new. The problem is, however, that no contenders have been suitable replacements to the current mayor so far. While incumbents naturally have an advantage in low-turnout elections (Trounstine, 2012), Mayor Mike Bradley had an advantage even in the 2018 high-turnout election because of the lack of a formidable opponent. The reason for the unwillingness to run against Bradley is unknown, but the predicament places Sarnia in a conflicting position – equally vitalized and stifled. The city is vitalized by its engaged public but stifled by the lack of viable candidates. In the bigger picture, the absence of a party system at the municipal level could be to blame for low energy election cycles (Sayers & Lucas, 2017), but Sarnia seems to be a unique case with its complicated web of scandal and its resulting government dynamic. Still, there is hope for such a situation in its people. It would take only one strong candidate to unseat Mike Bradley from his position, and the research shows voters are ready for the day it happens.

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