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Recommended Citation
Loewen, Kassandra (2015) 'Cooking up Collaboration: The Toronto Food Policy Council, the Vancouver Food Policy Council, and the Emergence of Civic Capacity,' Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 9. Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur/vol1/iss1/9

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Cooking up Collaboration: The Toronto Food Policy Council, the Vancouver Food Policy Council, and the Emergence of Civic Capacity

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Abstract: In the urban context, cooperation between disparate groups is necessary to accomplish many political and social objectives. Clarence Stone’s urban regime theory describes how governmental and non-governmental actors collaborate in the pursuit of a common goal in American municipalities. Civic capacity, a more recent application of this theory, describes socially progressive forms of collaboration. The purpose of this investigation is to further the development of urban regime theory by identifying and exploring factors that strengthen civic capacity within Canadian cities. The concept of civic capacity is applied to food policy in two Canadian municipalities, Toronto and Vancouver. The Toronto Food Policy Council (FPC) demonstrates well-developed civic capacity, whereas the Vancouver FPC is an example of emergent civic capacity. This is evident from a comparison of the factors that contribute to civic capacity in the Canadian context, namely credibility, agenda setting, support from municipal governments, and the cultivation of collaborative networks.

Keywords: Food policy councils; civic capacity; Canadian cities; collaboration networks; urban regime theory

Introduction

In the urban context, cooperation between disparate groups is necessary to accomplish many political and social objectives. Clarence Stone’s urban regime theory describes how governmental and non-governmental actors work together in the pursuit of a common goal. Traditionally, this theoretical perspective has been used to examine economic development regimes in American municipalities. Civic capacity, a more recent application of this theory, has emerged to describe socially progressive forms of collaboration. The purpose of this investigation is to further the development of urban regime theory by identifying and exploring factors that strengthen civic capacity within Canadian cities. In order to accomplish this objective, I apply the concept of civic capacity to food policy in two Canadian municipalities, Toronto and Vancouver. The Toronto Food Policy Council (FPC) demonstrates well-developed civic capacity, whereas the Vancouver FPC is an example of emergent civic capacity. This is evident from a comparison of the associated factors that contribute to civic capacity, namely credibility, agenda setting, support from municipal governments, and the cultivation of collaborative networks.

The global problem of food insecurity has profound and far-reaching consequences, particularly with regards to municipal health and well-being. Due to the fragmentation of power in capitalist globalized societies, collaboration is required to address local problems such as food security (Stone, 1989: 3). The presence of an urban regime is characterized by the articulation of
a policy agenda, the presence of a governing coalition, the utilization of resources provided by members of the coalition, and a system by which coalition members collaborate to accomplish their shared agenda (Stone, 2005: 329). According to this perspective, business interests and elected officials are the two most important coalition partners and they work together in order to receive mutual benefit, usually by maintaining the status quo or by promoting economic development (Mossberger, 2009: 42, 44). Consequently, urban regime theory is primarily concerned with the broad “arrangements by which a community is actually governed” (Stone, 1989: 6). On the other hand, civic capacity can be used to assess a specific policy area such as food security. At its simplest level, civic capacity involves recognizing a community problem and the utilization of collective strategies to address the problem (Stone, 2004: 2; Stone, 2001: 611). More specifically, Stone identifies qualities such as clearly articulated policy objectives, credible initiators, accessible resources and government support as crucial to the development of civic capacity (Stone, 2004: 6-8). Observers have noted that civic capacity is distinct from regimes because the former is more progressive and inclusive, and often addresses complex, interdisciplinary problems like education or community health. Since civic capacity features communal participation, rather than just the engagement of business and government elites, it is a more responsive form of governance (Mossberger, 2009: 50). Consequently, civic capacity is the derivative of urban regime theory that offers the most appropriate lens through which to study urban food policy.

Since the concept of civic capacity focuses on progressive initiatives, it deals with circumstances that have yet to be fully studied by urban regime theorists. Urban regime theory emphasizes how coalitional longevity is dependent upon the extent to which collaboration rewards partners with selective material incentives (Stone, 1989: 212). Regimes, or civic capacity, targeting progressive objectives such as improving food security offer fewer selective incentives than regimes that dedicate their efforts to economic development (Stone, 1993: 19-22). This is problematic because potential coalition partners, particularly businesses, are motivated to limit the agenda of concerns to issues that offer more selective incentives, thereby reducing the ability of progressive initiatives to address social inequalities (Stone, 1989: 209, 212-213; Stone, 2005: 325). In a recent survey of urban regime literature, Mossberger (2009: 45) notes that, while the presence of progressive regimes has received considerable theoretical attention there is relatively little evidence relating to the success of these initiatives. By examining FPCs in Vancouver and Toronto, both of which possess progressive objectives, this paper helps fill this research gap by describing the factors that promote the development of civic capacity in the context of food policy.

This investigation is also important because previous research involving urban regime theory, including civic capacity, has focused primarily on American municipalities. To date, urban regime theory has sparked some discussion in Canada but has not been widely studied (Cobban, 2003: 349-352; Leo, 2003: 344-348). The vulnerable nature of progressive regimes is especially apparent in the United States because American cities rely heavily upon own-source revenues (Mossberger, 2009: 45). Conversely, in Canada, cities often receive funding from other
levels of governments in addition to property taxes. Federal funding is becoming increasingly reliable and predictable, which in turn enhances municipal autonomy (Stoney & Graham, 2009: 384). For example, the newly expanded Federal Gas Tax Fund provides two billion dollars of funding annually to Canadian cities (Infrastructure Canada 2014). Since municipalities in Canada generally have more resources at their disposal than their American counterparts, it is worthwhile to investigate the role of municipal support in fostering the development of progressive civic capacity in Canadian cities.

**Introducing food policy councils**

FPCs are an ideal case study for the investigation of progressive civic capacity. Urban food policy is defined by public health researcher Wendy Mendes as “decisions that affect the ways that people in cities produce, obtain, consume and dispose of their food” (2008: 943). Municipal policies designed around food have emerged relatively recently. In 1982 the first FPC was founded in Knoxville, Tennessee, and since then the concept has spread throughout the United States and Canada (Scherb, Palmer, Frattaroli, & Pollack, 2012: 2). As of 2011 there were approximately 150 FPCs in North America (Scherb, Palmer, Frattaroli, & Pollack, 2012: 2).

The advent of FPCs is a consequence of how changes to global food systems since the 1980s have given rise to local concerns relating to diet, preventable disease, and environmental sustainability (Mendes, 2008: 946). FPCs perform several important functions in response to these challenges. These include promoting collaboration between governmental and non-governmental agents and supporting projects that address community needs (Harper et al., 2009: 19). This approach is consistent with the definition of civic capacity, which involves the recognition of a community problem and the mobilization of collaborative strategies to address it (Stone, 2004: 2; Stone, 2001: 611). Furthermore, the motivating factor for such collaboration is also consistent with that of civic capacity as the number of groups working on food-related issues has resulted in the fragmentation of political power (Harper et al., 2009: 19). The municipal governments of Toronto and Vancouver have both recognized that they lack sufficient resources to address food policy concerns alone, and have therefore created FPCs to facilitate collaboration with community organizations (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 19; City of Vancouver, 2013a: 19-20). Since FPCs have progressive mandates and embody key elements of civic capacity, they are a good case study for the exploration of progressive civic capacity in Canada.

Of all of the FPCs that have been established in Canada, the Toronto FPC and the Vancouver FPC are particularly relevant to the discussion of civic capacity. Both of these organizations are examples of a “hybrid model with direct links to government”, meaning that they are comprised of both municipal government representatives and members of civil society, as well as receive funding from City Council (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 7). More specifically, both the Toronto FPC and the Vancouver FPC were established by their local municipal government, in 1991 and 2004 respectively (Fridman & Lenters, 2013: 543; City of Vancouver, 2013a: 12). In addition, the Toronto FPC and the Vancouver FPC are well-suited for comparison
as both cities face issues relating to food security. In Toronto, 1 in 5 families are impoverished and since 2008 the number of people accessing food banks has increased by 14% (Fridman & Linters, 2013: 545). Similarly, in Vancouver, 5% of households are not financially capable of purchasing adequate food, and as of 2009 British Columbia had the highest provincial rate of child poverty for eight consecutive years (City of Vancouver, 2013a: 28). Because the Vancouver FPC and the Toronto FPC have the same type of organizational structure and operate within comparable urban environments they are ideal for comparative research investigating civic capacity.

While both the Toronto FPC and the Vancouver FPC demonstrate aspects of civic capacity in practice, the Toronto FPC embodies well-developed civic capacity whereas the Vancouver FPC is in the process of developing civic capacity. This observation is substantiated by comparing and contrasting four interrelated factors that contribute to the development of civic capacity: credibility, agenda setting, support from municipal governments, and the cultivation of collaboration networks. The credibility of the initiating agents was identified by Stone as a factor promoting the emergence of civic capacity in relation to the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence (Stone, 2004: 7). In this study, I find that the presence of policy champions as well as early initial successes were important in establishing the initial credibility of FPCs in Toronto and Vancouver.

**Establishing and maintaining credibility**

In order for a municipal government to back the creation of a FPC, it must first be established that such a venture is a credible means of addressing issues relating to food policy. In both Toronto and Vancouver, policy champions who advocated on behalf of the creation a FPC were vital in cultivating support, and consequently legitimacy, for these initiatives. This process is of particular significance to the establishment of the Toronto FPC as it was the first organization of its kind in Canada (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 16). Then City Councillor Jack Layton was instrumental in winning City Council’s support for the creation of a FPC (Caledon, 2001: 1). Layton, who was the Chair of the Toronto Board of Health at the time, mobilized Council votes, sold the project by framing it in terms of both social inclusion and economic benefit, and provided support to the nascent FPC (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 18; Toronto Food Policy Council, 2011). Along with other early initiators such as then-City Councillor Dan Leckie and future Toronto FPC Coordinator Wayne Roberts, Layton also helped cultivate broader community support for this initiative (Caledon, 2001: 1). By working as a boundary-crosser and uniting diverse interests in pursuit of a common goal, Layton was instrumental in establishing the initial credibility of the Toronto FPC.

Conversely, in Vancouver, organizations rather than individuals served as the primary policy champions behind the establishment of a FPC. From above, the British Columbia government provided funding to initiatives promoting community health leading up to the 2012 Winter Olympics (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 22). From below, the creation of the Vancouver
FPC was recommended by Vancouver’s Food Policy Task Force, which included representatives from approximately 70 community organizations actively providing food-related services, as well as representatives from City Council and Vancouver Coastal Health (Mendes, 2008: 949). Since it was championed by diverse stakeholders, the Vancouver FPC received early recognition as a credible means to address food-related policy issues. This comparison of the policy champions behind both the Vancouver FPC and the Toronto FPC illustrates that both individuals and organizations can serve as effective policy entrepreneurs. The ability to cross boundaries, as an individual or as a diverse task force, is necessary to confer credibility to progressive initiatives that promote civic capacity.

After initial buy-in has been reached, early practical successes help solidify the credibility of FPCs. More specifically, researchers have found that the presence of a first success, such as a food system assessment or production of a similar policy document, is important for FPCs to broaden their base of support and build legitimacy (Harper et al., 2009: 32; MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 27). The first major project of the Vancouver FPC was helping the municipal government produce the Vancouver Food System Assessment, published in 2005. Two out of the seven members of the assessment team were associated with the Vancouver FPC; that is, one member was a consultant who helped design the FPC, and the other was a sitting member of the FPC (Barbolet et al., 2005: 2). Moreover, the stated purpose of the Food System Assessment was to inform the actions of the Vancouver FPC (Barbolet et al., 2005: 2). By researching the nature of Vancouver’s food system and making the findings public, the Vancouver Food Policy Assessment provided direction for the Vancouver FPC and raised the profile of food policy.

Similarly, the Toronto FPC council’s initial project was also the production of a topical policy document. The 1991 City of Toronto Declaration on Food and Nutrition was authored and promoted by the Toronto FPC (Harper et al., 2009: 35). At the time of its creation, the Declaration was Canada’s most comprehensive articulation of food policy (MacRae, 1999: 189). Unlike the Vancouver FPC, which assisted the City of Vancouver in completing the Food Systems Assessment, the Toronto FPC wrote and championed the Declaration on Food and Nutrition. By demonstrating its capacity to work independently, the Toronto FPC cast itself as a collaborative initiative with legitimate influence, thereby promoting the emergence of civil capacity.

**Agenda setting**

Even if a collaborative institution is credible, if it lacks clear goals it is unlikely to succeed. For Stone, agenda setting is an integral aspect of both urban regimes and civic capacity (Stone, 2005: 329; Stone, 2004: 6). More specifically, *perceived* achievability is a crucial component of a successful communal purpose (Stone, 2005: 319). Both the Toronto FPC and the Vancouver FPC helped create municipal Food Strategies outlining specific policy objectives.

In Vancouver, the FPC assisted by organizing consultations with representatives of civil society and interested individuals (City of Vancouver, 2013a: 15). In total, the Vancouver FPC
processed feedback from approximately 2,200 people (City of Vancouver, 2013a: 4). Similarly, in Toronto, several individuals associated with the Toronto FPC sat on the Toronto Food Strategy Steering Group, and the FPC as a whole provided technical guidance (Mah & Thang, 2013: 101). The Toronto FPC and the Vancouver FPC both helped ensure that food policy decisions reflect the interests of municipal, civil society, and business interests.

Both the Toronto Food Strategy and the Vancouver Food Strategy articulate the significance of food policy and identify specific policy objectives. The Toronto Food Strategy frames food policy as a communal problem by citing hunger statistics, environmental concerns, and the needs of an aging population (Toronto Public Health, 2010: 3-4). Likewise, the Vancouver Food Strategy places food policy in a historical and cultural context, emphasizing how global trends impact health and wellbeing locally (City of Vancouver, 2013a: 9). Vancouver’s Food Strategy identifies five areas of focus: Food production; empowering residents; food access; food waste; and food processing and distribution (City of Vancouver, 2013a: 6). Parameters are provided for each goal. For example, the objective of empowering residents involves promoting community capacity and improving the dissemination of information (City of Vancouver, 2013a: 43). The Food Strategy in Toronto also provides a list of specific policy goals. These include making food a centrepiece of Toronto’s new green economy; eliminating hunger in Toronto; and empowering residents with food skills and information (Toronto Public Health, 2010: 18). Each goal is broken down into a series of actions. In order to eliminate hunger in Toronto, the Food Strategy recommends that student nutrition programs and food banks be expanded, that city planners consider food accessibility when making decisions, and that stakeholders advocate for enhanced social security legislation (Toronto Public Health, 2010: 21). Both the Toronto Food Strategy and the Vancouver Food Strategy increase the perceived achievability of progressive food policies by breaking them down into specific objectives, thereby motivating local stakeholders to become actively engaged.

However, since the adoption of the Toronto Food Strategy and the Vancouver Food Strategy, the former has developed into a vehicle for the promotion of civic capacity whereas the latter is still nascent. The Toronto Food Strategy has its own set of staff and the Toronto FPC is currently its official community reference group (Fridman & Lenters, 2013: 544, 546). Together, these two initiatives pool their resources in pursuit of solutions to food-related issues (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 26). In contrast, the Vancouver Food Strategy was established only recently and it is unclear how much institutional support it will have. The last reported progress on the City of Vancouver’s website is that it was officially approved by City Council on 30 January 2013 (City of Vancouver, 2014). While the Toronto Food Strategy and the Vancouver Food Strategy both enhance the perceived achievability of municipal food policy goals, the Toronto Food Strategy is a stronger example of civic capacity because it has access to institutional resources and works directly with the FPC.

**Accessing resources**
In addition to credibility and agenda setting, another significant factor that facilitates the development of civic capacity is access to resources. The availability of resources is essential for the existence of an urban regime, and Stone has identified the ability to attract resources as an important component of civic capacity (Stone, 2005: 329; Stone, 2004: 7). As discussed above, difficulty accessing sufficient resources contributes to the vulnerability of progressive regimes in the United States (Mossberger, 2009: 45). I find that, in the Canadian context, municipal governments are a crucial source of resources for FPCs. The Toronto FPC is embedded within Toronto Public Health, which is funded by the City of Toronto as well as by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (Fridman & Lenters, 2013: 546). Toronto Public Health provides the Toronto FPC with administrative support, a full-time coordinator, and a budget (Fridman & Lenters, 2013: 546; Caledon, 2001: 2). To the West, the City of Vancouver provides the Vancouver FPC with access to two full-time food policy staff (Mendes, 2008: 949). Such support is crucial, as other research has found that access to staff and funding has a direct, positive impact on the ultimate effectiveness of FPC activities (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 15, 18; Caledon, 2001: 2; Dahlberg, 1994: 5). Municipal government support provides resources that are used to maximize the impact of FPC initiatives. Consequently, such support plays a vital role in the development of civic capacity.

Despite the clear advantages of support from municipal governments, dependence upon local politicians for access to resources does have certain drawbacks. In particular, the Vancouver FPC and the Toronto FPC are vulnerable to fluctuations in the generosity of City Council. Both FPCs suffered temporarily from waning political support in the mid-2000s (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 20, 27). At this time, the Toronto FPC had been around for over a decade while the Vancouver FPC had been founded about a year or two previously. Since the Vancouver FPC was not as well established, it would have been more susceptible to reductions in government support. Fluctuations in municipal support have led some researchers to caution FPCs against becoming too dependent upon City Council (Dahlberg, 1994: 4). The ability of FPCs to catalyze the development of civic capacity around food policy is intimately related to the extent to which these organizations can access local government resources while avoiding complete dependency.

**Cultivating networks of collaboration**

Perhaps the most important factor that influences the ability of FPCs to facilitate the emergence of civic capacity is the extent to which they cultivate networks of collaboration with a diverse range of community actors. Cooperation among government representatives, members of civil society, grassroots organizations, and business leaders is fundamental to the concept of civic capacity. Just as links to institutional arrangements are necessary in order to have political leverage, so too is engagement with grass-roots initiatives vital to ensure polices are inclusive and responsive (Stone, 2005: 315, 326). Furthermore, one of the primary purposes of FPCs is to engage a diverse range of actors in the development and implementation of strategies designed to
improve community well-being (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 25). By giving representatives from across the municipality a seat at the table, challenges can be addressed in a manner that takes into consideration the particular needs of different communities.

There are two levels of collaboration. There is the cooperation that exists among the representatives of different stakeholders who serve as FPC members, and there are the partnerships that exist between the FPC as a whole and other community organizations and institutions. Both forms of collaboration are relevant to the development of civic capacity. The process of determining the membership of a FPC is a challenging and contentious task (MacRae & Donahue, 2013: 19). In the case of the Toronto FPC, it was intentionally designed to be a roundtable in order to include contrasting opinions (Welsh & MacRae, 1998: 250). This arrangement has thus far promoted collaboration and creative problem-solving (Welsh & MacRae, 1998: 251). There are 30 seats on the Toronto FPC, and they are deliberately filled to reflect a comprehensive spectrum of interests (Fridman & Lenters, 2013: 546). Specific seats are reserved for youth, farmers, and City Councillors (Fridman & Lenters, 2013: 546). A review of the biographies posted online of current Toronto FPC members found strong connections with at least 11 distinct community service organizations, 17 businesses, 5 post-secondary institutions, and the presence of a range of professionals including an Aboriginal nutritional consultant and the founder of a communications and design firm (Toronto Food Policy Council, 2014). The strategic steps that have been taken to ensure that the Toronto FPC reflects a broad range of stakeholders promotes the development of creative initiatives as well as civic capacity.

The Vancouver FPC also has an intentionally diverse and representative membership. Of its 21 members, there are seven members-at-large and two members representing each of the following policy areas: food production, processing, access, distribution, consumption, waste management, and system-wide issues (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2014a). No biographies of current members are available online, though the FPC has publically committed to including a comprehensive range of interests and opinions (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2014b). Like the Toronto FPC, the Vancouver FPC represents a diverse cohort of stakeholders. In addition to facilitating the development of novel solutions to complex problems, diverse membership creates a collaborative environment where civic capacity can flourish.

The second level of collaboration involves partnerships between FPCs and entities such as community service providers, businesses, and grass-roots initiatives. The Toronto FPC has an extensive network of collaboration partners. Toronto’s City Council website identifies 15 organizations that the Toronto FPC has run joint ventures with since 1991 (City of Toronto, 2014). These organizations represent a broad range of interests, and include Business Improvement Associations, Ryerson University, as well as FoodShare, a grass-roots initiative dedicated to promoting food security (City of Toronto, 2014; FoodShare, 2014). The Toronto FPC goes beyond serving as an advisory board on food policy issues by taking on an active role as an incubator for up-and-coming initiatives relating to food policy. That is, the FPC provides support to other organizations in various ways, such as by conducting research, providing fundraising support, or helping generate promotional materials (Welsh & MacRae, 1998: 252).
To illustrate this process, in the late 1990s the Toronto FPC collaborated with both FoodShare and the City of Toronto’s Economic Development Division to establish commercial kitchen incubators (Caledon, 2001: 6). Commercial kitchen incubators address both economic and social needs by giving small food companies inexpensive access to commercial kitchen space, thereby improving food diversity and accessibility (Caledon, 2001: 6-7). The Toronto FPC assisted by conducting background research on commercial kitchen incubators, thus laying the groundwork for the first pilot project (Caledon, 2001: 6-7). This is an excellent example of how the Toronto FPC actively cultivates civic capacity by bringing together different actors and enabling them to work together on a common cause.

On the other hand, the Vancouver FPC has a more limited objective than its counterpart in Toronto. Its primary function is to assess current policies relating to food and provide recommendations to City Council, rather than to directly incubate novel initiatives (Barbolet et al., 2005: 10). That is, the Vancouver FPC provides a forum where non-governmental stakeholders can interact with City Council and offer feedback. A significant number of the projects the Vancouver FPC has worked on involve municipal policies or guidelines, such as updating the City of Vancouver’s policy on backyard hens or evaluating the city’s food scraps collection program (City of Vancouver, 2013a: 12). This does not mean, however, that the Vancouver FPC has no external partners. The Vancouver FPC, via the City of Vancouver, works with the Vancouver Foundation, a large philanthropic organization, to provide grants to projects that improve food accessibility (City of Vancouver, 2012: 66). In addition, the Vancouver FPC collaborated with South Vancouver Neighbourhood House, Vancouver Coastal Health, and Village Vancouver, a grassroots sustainability organization, to establish the South Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Network (City of Vancouver, 2013b: 80). Neighbourhood Food Networks are collaborations of community groups, interested individuals and businesses that work together to implement creative food strategies in a particular region of the city (City of Vancouver, 2012: 68). The relatively limited extent to which the Vancouver FPC partners with non-governmental organizations reduces its capacity to promote cooperation among different groups within Vancouver. This is an important reason why the Vancouver FPC is an example of emergent, rather than well-developed, civic capacity.

That being said, examples of collaboration between FPCs and non-governmental organizations highlight an important adjustment to urban regime theory: broad purposes, in addition to selective incentives, can facilitate cooperation. Just as the Vancouver Foundation can pursue its broad purpose of promoting “healthy, vibrant, and livable communities” more effectively through collaboration with the Vancouver FPC, so too can FoodShare better pursue its agenda of improving food security by working with the Toronto FPC (Vancouver Foundation, 2014). The pursuit of a broad and inspiring purpose is something for which both individuals and organizations are willing to make sacrifices; consequentially, their significance to cooperation in the urban context should not be underestimated (Stone, 2005: 318). The motivating quality of broad purposes can help explain why collaboration around a progressive agenda is indeed possible.
Conclusion

In sum, the cultivation of collaboration networks, municipal government support, agenda setting and the establishment of credibility are all factors that significantly influence the institutional effectiveness of FPCs. In particular, a comparison of these factors distinguishes the well-developed civic capacity associated with the Toronto FPC from the emergent civic capacity of the Vancouver FPC. Relative to the Vancouver FPC, the Toronto FPC has a broader network of collaboration partners, has been less affected by fluctuations in City Council support, offers greater institutional support to the city’s Food Strategy, and had an early initial success that was more effective at establishing it as an independent and authoritative organization. Moreover, these findings have broader implications for urban regime theory, as they explore factors that enable the development of progressive civic capacity in Canada, such as the unifying quality of broad purposes and the importance of municipal funding. By learning more about civic capacity and FPCs, we maximize our capacity to launch initiatives that address the local challenges posed by global systems.

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