Do mayors walk the talk? Evidence on local responsiveness from elite surveys and online platforms

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Abstract: Incumbent politicians are frequently asked about their role perceptions in elite surveys, but little is known about whether they indeed act on their self-perceived priorities while in office. Using novel data from Hungary, Slovakia, and England, this paper contrasts the perceived importance of the task of creating a conducive environment for locals to voice (and find remedy for) their concerns with the speed and efficiency municipal administrations tackle such problem reports. Utilizing the second wave of data collection of the POLLEADER survey in 2015, it tests whether incumbent behavior is congruent with self-declared importance of "helping citizens resolve complaints with the municipal government". To that end, real-world administrative data on citizen-municipality interactions on volunteer-run online platforms is subsequently merged with elite survey responses. Using fixed effects and multilevel models, we analyze original data on problem reports submitted by locals, covering the periods of 2014–2019 (for Hungary) and 2014–2018 (for Slovakia and England). Our key dependent variable concerns the share of resolved problem reports, which we estimate with predictors obtained via the POLLEADER elite survey. The country cases covered in the analysis provide a neat balance between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as institutional features such as fragmentation and vertical power relations. We find substantial country heterogeneity and a moderating effect of population. As the size of municipality (i.e. number of inhabitants) increases, the relationship between mayors' self-declared perceptions on the effectiveness of complaint schemes and the share of resolved problems becomes weaker. This suggests that responsiveness and public service delivery is more contingent on mechanisms of partisan politics in more populous municipalities. Our findings have implications for our understanding of local public service delivery, individual and political characteristics shaping elected officials' role perceptions, as well as the external validity of elite surveys administered on incumbent political leaders.