

Size and Local Democracy: Scale Effects in City Politics

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As James Madison would not hesitate to tell us, the scale of a polity or jurisdiction is one of the most basic factors organizing political life. By *scale*, I refer to the number of inhabitants (or, alternately, constituents or voters) in a political unit, although geographic size may also shape political behavior. Large jurisdictional scale implies that candidates for office must campaign in larger constituencies, necessitating more use of paid media, more fundraising effort, and professional campaign advice. To residents of large-scale polities, government often seems distant, remote, and bureaucratic, and the intercession of interest groups, lobbyists, or organized protest activity may be more necessary to access or influence public officials. In these and other ways, the incentives, constraints, and opportunities facing politicians and citizens alike tend to differ systematically depending on a jurisdiction's scale.¹

A generation ago, Dahl and Tufte (1973) highlighted some of the ways in which the scale of a polity can affect political participation, political efficacy, and electoral competition, although they readily admitted that a paucity of suitable data made their exercise more suggestive than definitive. Today, although the scale of municipal jurisdictions in the United States varies considerably across the landscape, scale remains oddly under-analyzed as a variable that might shape the behavior of local politicians and voters.² Among the major contemporary works in urban political behavior, only the research of Oliver (2000; 2001) takes considerable account of scale effects. Controlling for other relevant factors, Oliver finds an association between larger city population size and reduced levels of both voting and nonelectoral forms of political participation. He further shows that residents of larger cities are less interested in local (though not national) politics and are less likely to be politically mobilized. Oliver derived these findings from data not initially intended for the study of local politics—the national Citizen Participation Study—and then geocoded the place of residence of the respondents, matching them to local census data. Despite this somewhat herculean effort, an assessment that rests on a widely scattered sample of individuals may not be an ideal way to examine the nuances of local electoral systems.

Overall, little research on local political behavior in the United States approaches the scale issue in a self-conscious way.³ This oversight may arise from the organization of American political science. There is not really a recognized subfield of “local politics,” per se, in which the size of the local unit is considered as one of its most basic political facts of life. “State and local politics” specialists sometimes treat the local as an afterthought, whereas “urban politics” experts typically limit

their focus to large cities, with “large” defined somewhat arbitrarily (Danielson and Lewis 1996). But political boundaries—and the scale of a political unit—surely do more than carve out neutral containers for politics; rather, they help construct the politics that take place within them (Weiher 1991; Burns 1994).

Recent work in urban politics has gone beyond individual case studies to examine larger-N samples of municipalities, but the cities composing these samples still usually adhere to some prescribed population-size threshold. The insignificance of smaller localities seems to be presumed rather than researched. A few urbanists explicitly examine the suburbs, but their focus has tended toward the features of suburban communities other than scale. Indeed, in an era in which many suburban jurisdictions (particularly in the Sunbelt) have population sizes exceeding those of some traditional central cities, one ought not conflate “suburban” with “small.”⁴ The city/suburb dichotomy—if such a dichotomy exists—is distinct from, though related to, the question of jurisdictional scale.

If scale is a key factor organizing local political life, then attempts to generalize about cities by focusing only on communities above some size threshold, such as 50,000 residents, result in truncated samples. The only reliable way to consider the effects of scale is to assemble and analyze relevant data for cities with a wide range of sizes. This is not to say that one would want to randomly sample all 19,000-plus municipalities in the United States, since most are tiny, with nearly half boasting fewer than 1,000 residents as of 2002 (Christensen and Hogen-Esch 2006, 87). One defensible approach to this challenge would be to sample municipalities of various size ranges in relation to their relative shares of the national population—although ultimately, one's sampling strategy should be dictated primarily by the research questions posed.

Ideally, researchers could use an appropriately constructed local elections data archive for three levels of analysis: (1) the voter, (2) the candidate or campaign, and (3) the political jurisdiction itself. Such a multilevel approach—potentially incorporating empirical approaches that explicitly take account of the nested character of the data—could deliver a trove of important findings about political behavior and electoral institutions. One can sketch out some preliminary hypotheses regarding how jurisdictional scale might matter at each level.

INDIVIDUAL VOTER PSYCHOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR

Imagine two voters participating in mayoral elections: one in a large city that comprises a major share of the population, land area, and economic activity in its metropolitan region, and the other in a small suburb that constitutes only a small

slice of its metropolis. We might anticipate that big-city voters would hold their mayor responsible, at least in part, for the health of the economy and job market in the area, whereas their counterparts from the small suburbs nested in a large metropolis would likely realize that their mayor holds little or no effective control over economic conditions that would affect their success in the labor-market. Retrospective, sociotropic, or economic voting, then, may well be conditional on jurisdictional scale. The relevant scope of elected officials' control

resignation, rather than by losing elections or advancing to higher office.

LOCAL ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

How, then, might city size affect electoral politics at the jurisdictional level? In large-scale cities, greater scope for political ambition may result in more competitive elections, whereas in small jurisdictions, it is not uncommon to see city elections canceled because of a lack of contested races. Party

The relevant scope of elected officials' control increases with city size, and voter expectations likely adjust accordingly. In this case, it is the city's scale in relation to the surrounding metropolitan area that matters. A city of 50,000 residents that is the principal center of a largely rural county may have voter expectations that differ considerably from a city of 50,000 residents within a metropolitan area of 5 million residents. In the smallest-scale jurisdictions where the municipality approximates a neighborhood in size, votes seem more likely to be cast on the basis of neighborhood-level issues, such as "not in my backyard" land-use concerns.

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CANDIDATES, CAMPAIGNS, AND POLITICAL CAREERS

Running for office in a large community generally requires capital-intensive campaign strategies rather than "retail politics." Of course, this effect may be mediated by local electoral institutions, since large cities that hold district elections (if the districts are of small scale) may have less demanding campaign environments. Nevertheless, the more professionalized and expensive nature of campaigning in large-scale districts or jurisdictions probably affects candidate recruitment: The individuals who either self-select or agree to run when asked may tend to be those with greater ambitions, organizational connections, and resources. In small communities, by contrast, candidates may view political service as an extension of their community activities in other realms, such as local service organizations and clubs, rather than as a career (Prewitt 1970; Sokolow 1989). If such a lack of ambition is indeed a function of smaller city size, the implication might be that many local elected officials see their role as more akin to a trustee than a delegate (Lewis and Neiman 2009). This community-service style of politics also implies a greater likelihood that candidates will be informally drafted, lack prior political experience, and exit office as a result of voluntary

organizations—or the party-like slating organizations that exist in many of the localities that hold officially nonpartisan elections—are probably more influential venues for candidate recruitment, publicity, and issues in large cities. Voter mobilization may rely more on organized get-out-the-vote campaigns in larger cities, whereas informal mobilization by friends, family members, or social pressure may prevail in smaller places. Another potential effect of scale goes to the heart of the old debate over community power. Pro-development business elites such as homebuilders, major landowners, and retailers potentially have the deepest pockets for funding local campaigns. If organized campaign finance activity is less essential in small jurisdictions—and thus, candidates are less beholden to campaign contributors—then urbanists' traditional views about the primacy of business elites in local politics may need to be reexamined; this factor, too, may be conditioned by scale.

All three sets of hypotheses—at the individual, candidate, and citywide level—seem plausible, but they are just that: hypotheses. Without a systematic dataset of local elections—preferably linking information on voters, candidates, races, office-holding patterns, and electoral institutions—we lack a rigorous way to examine the effects of scale on electoral politics. Is there a threshold size at which point politics becomes relatively "professionalized," a vocation rather than an avocation? Is there a threshold—perhaps exceeded only in the biggest cities—at which the participation-reducing effects of city size on political efficacy become outweighed by large cities' greater electoral competitiveness, increased media attention, and more important policy outcomes? Such questions and others like them emerging from the local level go to the heart of voter and candidate psychology. But they will remain largely unanswered without a data infrastructure for researching local elections. ■

NOTES

1. The greater social and ethnic/racial diversity that tend to characterize larger jurisdictions also affect political life, but these dimensions can be considered distinct and separable from the question of size itself.
2. Similarly, the scale of counties and special-purpose governments (e.g., school districts, utility districts) also varies markedly. For simplicity, I consider here only municipal (i.e., city, town, village, or borough) government.
3. Several scholars have recently studied the relationship between local scale and civic participation in a set of Northern European democracies. See the special theme issue on "Size and Democracy" in *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 6 (2002).
4. For instance, the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 population estimates show that Mesa, Arizona, has 80,000 more residents than Minneapolis; Aurora, Colorado, exceeds Pittsburgh in population; and Plano, Texas, is more than double the scale of that font of urban political studies, New Haven.

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