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Defining the community of interest as thematic and cognitive regions

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ABSTRACT

When deciding where to draw the boundaries for electoral districts, officials often strive to ensure that communities of interest are not split up but kept wholly within those boundaries. But what constitutes a community of interest is vague, with legal and academic sources describing either a thematic region with shared demographic and land-use traits, or a cognitive region that is meaningful to people and commonly agreed upon. This study, conducted in the city of Santa Barbara, California, seeks to identify communities of interest at the sub-city level as both thematic regions—by clustering Census tracts and land parcels according to classes of relevant variables—and cognitive regions—by surveying residents about the size and locational extent of their community and finding areas of agreement. We then assess the degree to which the two types of regions overlap as a way to evaluate how well the two meanings correspond. We also examine the amount of overlap between the two sets of regions and the city council electoral districts that were recently created in Santa Barbara. Our study finds that the two types of regions correspond relatively well to each other in this test city, but that the electoral districts correspond more to the thematic regions, understandable given that the district creation made no attempt to survey residents about their beliefs.

1. Introduction

Many democracies elect their representatives from carefully crafted districts, but the methods that governments use to draw their boundaries vary substantially (Handley & Grofman, 2008). While many jurisdictions allow their public officials to tweak the lines to serve partisan interests, others opt to use a set of nonpartisan criteria to create districts that are more representative (Mann & Cain, 2005). One such criterion, referred to as "respecting the community of interest," is the degree to which district boundaries unite—rather than separate—a *community of interest*, defined as a group of people with shared values, concerns, and cultural traits (Grofman, 1985). The fact that dozens of polities utilize this criterion (Handley, 2008) demonstrates the wide belief that respecting communities of interest is critical to ensuring effective and fair representation for members of these groups. When these individuals are kept together in a single district, it is thought, the resulting homogeneity enables its representative to better focus on advocating for and catering to that group's interests (Morrill, 1987).

While a general consensus exists on the importance of ensuring that electoral districts respect the community of interest, there is little agreement on any of the specific traits that characterize such a community (Cain, Mac Donald, & McDonald, 2005). If this criterion is not precisely defined, officials can draw district boundaries in various ways that do not end up fulfilling the intent behind the community criterion. Members of those communities will find themselves more poorly represented as a result. In this paper, we explore defining a community of interest as a thematic region, according to demographic and land-use attributes, and as a cognitive region, according to people's beliefs about their community ascertained from surveys we administer. Then we analyze how communities of interest defined as these two regions correspond with one another and with existing electoral districts (Fig. 1). This will tell us about the degree to which thematically defining communities of interest reflects the distribution of particular demographic and land-use variables in the city, and conversely, the degree to which cognitively defining communities of interest captures residents' conceptions of their community.

2. The community of interest as used in (re)districting

Four specific criteria stand out for their frequent appearances as stated goals in district boundary drawing around the world:

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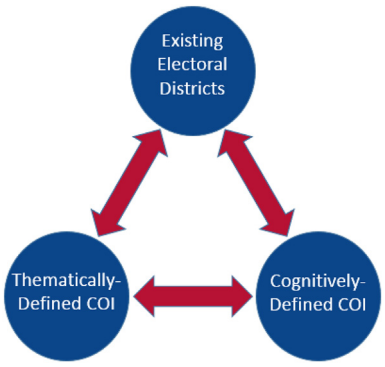

Fig. 1. Conceptual diagram of the aim of this research—to investigate the relationships between the three types of regions (COI = community of interest).

consideration of existing local administrative boundaries, contiguity of shape, compactness of shape, and respect for communities of interest (Handley, 2008; Mann, 2005). Most of these are defined easily enough: The first criterion involves making district lines correspond to administrative boundaries such as county and city lines as closely as possible; the second refers to keeping a district as a single coterminous shape instead of unconnected pieces; and the third concerns ensuring that a district has a rounded, sensible shape instead of a sinuous, convoluted one. A consensus definition has eluded the fourth goal of respecting communities of interest, however, as what exactly constitutes one has remained very nebulous (Cain et al., 2005; Courtney, 2008; Medew, 2008). Whatever the definition may be, the objective with this criterion is to respect these communities by ensuring as much as possible that district boundaries keep them together, rather than split them apart.

Despite the lack of agreement on the exact nature of a community of interest, certain common threads appear across various definitions. One is that there is a geographic element to the concept. Morrill (1987) called the community of interest "the most geographic criterion, in the sense that a major concern of geography is to identify the regional structure of a society … the territories with which citizens strongly identify, and whose integrity they want to maintain" (p. 251). Stephanopoulos (2012a) concurred, arguing that people who live nearby tend to have common interests and values and also feel more connected to each other. From the very beginning of California's use of the criterion for redistricting, the state very clearly defined it as a territorial concept—a particular area with certain interests (Mac Donald & Cain, 2013). This remains the case today, as the California Constitution defines communities of interest as "*contiguous* populations" (Stephanopoulos, 2012b, pp. 287–288). In light of these findings, it makes sense to think of a community of interest as a type of region.

Another common thread is the objective or thematic aspect of the definition. This aspect is particularly emphasized in the (re) districting law of various jurisdictions. Australian law, for instance, defines a community of interest in sociological terms by referring to "economic, social, and regional interests," as well as accessibility of communication and travel (Medew, 2008, p. 103). The state of Colorado mentions "ethnic, cultural, economic, trade area, geographic, and demographic factors" (Cain et al., 2005, p. 18). The most detailed objective traits come from California law, which references "common social and economic interests" such as those common to urban, rural, industrial, or agricultural areas, "and those common to areas in which the people share similar living standards, use the same transportation facilities, have similar work opportunities, or have access to the same media of communication relevant to the election process" (California State Constitution, Article XXI, Section 2-d-4).

The last important thread evident across the definitions for the community of interest is the subjective or cognitive element. Besides focusing on thematic attributes that come from observing *outward* characteristics of the people making up these communities, there may be another way to understand the concept that comes from observing *inward* cognitive attributes of those same people. Montello (2003) discussed this thematic versus cognitive distinction in the context of regions, describing the former as being "formed by the measurement and mapping of one or more observable content variables or themes" and the latter as being "produced by people's informal perceptions and conceptions" (p. 177). Some scholars have suggested that a human cognitive element should come into play when considering communities of interest. Chambers (1999) held that such communities are defined subjectively. Mac Donald and Cain (2013) maintained that their residents "have to perceive and acknowledge that a social, cultural, or economic interest is politically relevant" (p. 612). Perceptions of such interests do not always correlate with socioeconomic attributes, but may instead reflect environmental and cultural concerns, or even things such as attachment to places of recreation. Stephanopoulos (2012a) likewise argued that these communities have a subjective element, and that that element "does not always coincide with objective interests" (p. 1435). These conclusions lend support to the idea that one can define a community of interest subjectively as well as objectively.

Even authors who were not addressing communities of interest per se have recognized the importance of citizens living in a district with which they can identify. Prescott (1965) recommended that "boundar[ies] should be drawn to cater for local sentiment and regional patriotism" (p. 173). Morrill (1990) contended that districts should be meaningful entities with which constituents can identify. Grofman (1993) introduced an idea that he called the "cognizability principle," which refers to the ability of residents to cognize their district by being aware of the general configuration of the boundaries, thereby facilitating their "identification of and with the district" (pp. 1262–1263). These calls to consider individuals' impressions about and attachments to their local community during the process of (re)districting represent a potentially informative way to understand what communities of interest are apart from thematic aspects. They also raise the interesting theoretical question of how well cognitively-defined communities of interest will correspond to thematically-defined ones.

What rationale lies behind requiring respect for communities of interest in (re)districting? Handley (2008) explained how many authorities and citizens believe that "electoral districts should be cohesive units with common interests related to representation" so as to make the representative's job easier (p. 275). That way the representative can advocate for his or her constituents more effectively. If that is not the case, the representative may have to choose between the interests of people in disparate parts of the district, and whoever loses out will feel unrepresented as their interests go unattended (Morrill, 1987). Furthermore, more homogenous districts that respect communities of interest, while less competitive, tend to lead to representatives who are ideologically closer to the typical voter (Brunell, 2008; Buchler, 2005). If more competitive districts are desired, it is possible for such a district to include ideologically opposed communities while still wholly containing them. That way, communities can still be united in their grassroots efforts (Mac Donald & Cain, 2013, p. 613); also, few will be separated by district boundaries from their community and thereby suffer a "distinct informational disadvantage" about the election (Winburn & Wagner, 2010, p. 374). For these reasons among others, bringing clarity to the vague idea of communities of