



## Place and participation in local elections

John Lappie\*, Melissa Marschall

Rice University, Department of Political Science, MS-24, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005, USA



### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 December 2016  
Received in revised form  
8 February 2018  
Accepted 16 February 2018

#### Keywords:

Mayoral elections  
Turnout  
Contestation  
Sense of place  
Local democracy

### ABSTRACT

How does place matter for participation in local politics and elections? To date, social scientists have largely ignored this question, in part because their focus has not been on local politics and elections. We think this is unfortunate given that 99% of all governments in the U.S. are local governments. Given stark differences in rates of turnout and office seeking across local and state/federal elections, we believe more attention to the way in which 'sense of place' affects residents' political behavior is warranted. In this study we look explicitly at how the geographic, functional, and socio-demographic features of cities shape turnout and contestation in local elections. Analyzing mayoral elections in two U.S. states, we find evidence not only that contextual factors are associated with both turnout and contestation, but *place* itself matters, independently of the features of its inhabitants, for the health of local democracy.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

The overwhelming majority of elections in the United States are for local office, however, local elections are understudied in the social sciences. Scholars who do work in this area have primarily investigated turnout in large U.S. cities, and have paid particular attention to the relationship between city size and civic engagement. Though we lack systematic evidence to draw definite conclusions, turnout in local elections is often considered to be abysmally low. That said, high turnout in local elections does not mean very much if voters have no decisions to make on election day. A recent report by the Center for Local Elections in American Politics found that 53 percent of mayoral elections held between 2000 and 2016 were uncontested (Marschall, Lappie, & Williams, 2017). Obviously, a healthy democracy needs voters *and* candidates, but at the local level both are sometimes in short supply. Why is this?

In this study, we build on the work of political scientists like Dahl (1967) and Oliver, Ha and Callen (2012), Oliver (2001) as well as the multi-disciplinary literature on sense of place to empirically assess not only whether the size and socio-demographic characteristics of cities shape participation in local elections, but also how and why "place" matters for local democracy. Our theoretical framework extends beyond electoral rules and context to consider how geographic, functional, and socio-demographic features of

cities influence turnout and contestation in local elections.

Our empirical analysis is based on data from two states—Indiana and Kentucky. Though not representative of all U.S. states, these neighboring states share a number of commonalities in terms of the size and the demographic features of their municipalities and their local government arrangements more generally. Cities and towns in these two states are mostly small and medium-sized, as most municipalities in the U.S. are. At the same time, the two states differ on key institutional features such as election timing and partisan elections. Because we have complete data on mayoral elections for all cities across multiple election cycles in both states, we are able to tease out the extent to which institutional, demographic, and place-based factors matter for turnout and the likelihood of uncontested elections. Our empirical results indicate that *place* itself influences turnout and contestation, independently of the features of its inhabitants. One particularly interesting finding from this study, especially in light of the 2016 Presidential election, is the strong, positive relationship between rural municipalities and turnout in mayoral elections. The higher turnout in these localities and the fact that Trump won small towns and rural America easily, capturing 62% of vote (Morin, 2016), suggests that more attention to rural America, the distinctiveness of these places, and their role in American politics is warranted.

### Local politics and place

Interest in American national elections are high. The media offers virtually round-the-clock coverage for nearly a year, partisan

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [john.p.lappie@rice.edu](mailto:john.p.lappie@rice.edu) (J. Lappie), [marschal@rice.edu](mailto:marschal@rice.edu) (M. Marschall).

and ideological passions run high, and the candidates' campaigns are professional and well-organized. None of this is typically true of local elections.

For starters, while the issues at stake in local politics are important, and arguably have a greater effect on day-to-day life than the decisions made at the state or federal level, they tend to be issues of limited scope, without much ideological dimension (Oliver et al., 2012). Some would argue that it is only in very large cities that local politics begins to get interesting (Keheller and Lowery, 2009, 2004). In addition, unlike federal and most state politicians, who are careerists, in most American cities politics is said to be dominated by amateurs who run out of a sense of civic duty, or perhaps indignation over a specific local issue. Local elected officials are typically not considered to be progressively ambitious, and spend only a small fraction of their time on their mayoral duties (Oliver et al., 2012). This is partly due to the fact that many local offices receive little or no remuneration. Another factor relates to the limited functional responsibilities assigned to many local jurisdictions. Governments that provide fewer services tend to have relatively small budgets and more tranquil politics. Finally, a large share of local elections are non-partisan and/or are off-cycle—in odd years or times when there are no federal or state races on the ballot. For all of these reasons and more, interest in local politics tends to be lower than interest in national politics (Oliver, 2001).

It would of course be wrong to say that interest in local politics is low across all local elections and all local jurisdictions. In many places, local politics are lively, turnout is consistently high, and there is no shortage of local candidates. Among other factors, election timing (Anzia, 2012, 2013; Hajnal, Lewis, & Louch, 2002) and the concentration of groups typically considered as 'stakeholders' in local politics—homeowners (Fischel, 2009), higher income residents (Kelleher & Lowery, 2004)—are linked to higher political participation. In this study, we argue that features specific to place, which map to certain types of cities, also impinge upon citizens in ways that increase their awareness of place, thereby fostering greater participation in local politics. In these cities, residents have a better developed 'sense of place.'

The literature on 'sense of place' seeks to understand how place shapes a diverse array of social behaviors and outcomes (Harris, Werner, Brown, & Ingebritsen, 1995; Mesch & Manor, 1998; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). Although this broad and multi-disciplinary area of inquiry has led to a certain level of conceptual muddiness (Tester, Ruel, Anderson, Reitzes, & Oakley, 2011),<sup>1</sup> most scholars agree that sense of place is characterized by the meaning people give to certain spatial points or geographic locations (Altman & Low, 1992; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). And, while some people lack a sense of place altogether, others give meaning to many different places (Tester et al., 2011).

Sense of place is typically measured either with survey data that seek to directly gauge the degree to which individuals *feel* that they belong to, identify with, or are dependent on, various place scales—home, neighborhood, city, region, nation, etc. (Lewicka, 2011), or via Census or other aggregate-level data that tap residents' social networks, shared values, and sense of belonging. In this study we build and expand upon the latter. We conceptualize place as a locality that is given meaning by the human activities that take place

within it, and focus not on the individual-level emotional and symbolic meaning people ascribe to place, but instead on the contextual, functional, and geo-spatial dimensions of place (Lin & Lockwood, 2014). As political sociologists have long argued, political behavior does not depend on individual-level characteristics alone, but instead, is shaped in important ways by the broader environment in which individuals are situated (Huckfeldt, 1986).

#### *City size and other contextual features of place*

Political science research, and the sense of place literature, have both given a great deal of attention to how the size, socio-demographic, and political makeup of local jurisdictions affect whether and how individuals participate in civil and political life. Scholars examining turnout in U.S. local elections have tended to focus on the effects of city size; for different reasons, so has the sense of place literature. However, with the exception of Downs' rational voter theory (1957), which posits a direct, negative relationship between city size and voter turnout, most studies investigating how place shapes participation and/or civic engagement incorporate other features of the local population into their causal explanations for how and why city size matters. For example, because small cities tend to be more homogeneous, they presumably foster stronger psychological attachments, loyalties, and shared values, which in turn foster electoral participation (Oliver, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972). In fact, residents of more homogenous communities do tend to have a stronger sense of place, though the effects of city size by itself are unclear (Lewicka, 2011). Residents of smaller cities tend to also have geographically proximate social networks, which not only disseminate local political information, but also create social pressure to participate (Grosser & Schram, 2006; Oliver, 2001). Since population size and density are positively related (Wirth, 1938), residents in smaller jurisdictions may also be less prone to both privacy-oriented behavior (Oliver, 2001; Simmel, 1903; Verba & Nie, 1972) and the by-stander effect—whereby the presence of so many possible actors discourages individuals from acting since everyone assumes someone else will do so (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002; Milgram, 1970).

On the other hand, since governments tend to provide fewer services in smaller cities, there is less at stake and thus potentially less incentive for voters to turnout in local elections (Dahl, 1967). There is also likely to be less candidate recruitment in smaller cities. This stems in part from the fact that local politics is less professional and local economies are less complex in smaller cities. In addition, compared to bigger cities, public officials in smaller cities tend to receive less compensation and be less professional, which may lead to less electoral competition, and ultimately reduced interest in local politics and elections (Kelleher & Lowery, 2009, 2004). Though the arguments on both sides are convincing, to date evidence remains scarce and relatively unimpressive. Most empirical studies have failed to find any significant relationship between city size and turnout (Kelleher & Lowery, 2004; Caren, 2007; Oliver, 2000, 1999; but see Hajnal et al, 2002).

Beyond city size, social scientists have identified other contextual factors that operate on residents' political attitudes and behavior. Naturally, one of the most important of these is economic status. Residents in low-income areas tend to vote less in national elections (Alex-Assensoh, 1997) than residents of more affluent areas. Cohen and Dawson (1993) find that residing in high poverty neighborhoods is negatively associated with talking to family or friends about politics, having indirect contact with public officials, attending meetings about community problems, and giving money to candidates, groups, or political parties. Conversely, a wealthy community is no panacea; Oliver (2001) finds that economic homogeneity has negative effects on political engagement and argues

<sup>1</sup> For example, scholars conceive of sense of place as both a multi- and uni-dimensional concept, as well as a set of correlated concepts (see Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Some refer to the over-arching concept as place attachment (see Manzo, 2003) and focus on the mostly positive affect associated it (though some scholars do note that attachments can also be negative; see Manzo, 2005, 2003). We utilize the term "sense of place" to describe the entire over-arching concept.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7492642>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7492642>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)