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Local Government Size and Political Efficacy: Do Citizen Panels Make a Difference?

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ABSTRACT

Democratic theorists typically suggest that citizens served by small local governments have high levels of political efficacy. However, it is conceivable that large governments can overcome the burden of bigness by introducing structures that involve citizens more closely in decision-making. This paper analyses whether jurisdiction size influences political efficacy in Welsh local government, and whether the presence of a citizen panel makes a difference to the size-efficacy relationship. Multi-level analyses suggest that size is negatively associated with internal and external political efficacy, but that the use of citizen panels bolsters the external efficacy of citizens served by larger local government.

KEYWORDS

Local government size; political efficacy; citizen participation; public administration

Introduction

Encouraging citizens to participate in the decision making of local governments has become a key policy goal in countries across the world (Caparas & Agrawal, 2016; Ishii, 2017; Michels, 2012; Smith, 2009). Citizen participation has instrumental value in that it promises improvements in allocative efficiency—where local public services increasingly match the needs of citizens (Kernaghan, 2009)—but it also promises to perform a development function as well. Theorists describe participation as “intrinsically beneficial” in that it “develops many positive, democratic character traits, such as community-mindedness, political self-competence, and satisfaction with decision-making structures, institutions, and outputs” (Finkel, 1987; pp. 442–443; Tam, 1998; Yetano, Royo, & Acerete, 2010). In short, citizen participation is crucial for sound governance (Farazmand, 2004, 2017).

Participation levels have in turn been found to be a function of citizens’ underlying sense of political efficacy (Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Finkel, 1985); the feeling—according to Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954, p. 187)—“that individual political action does have, or could have, an impact on the political process”. Simply put, citizens will be more likely to participate if they believe: they have something to say; they have an opportunity to say

it; and they believe that it will make a difference (Caparas & Agrawal, 2016).

The optimum size of local government has long been seen as central to the feelings of political efficacy (Dahl & Tufte, 1973; John, 2010; Newton, 1982; Soul & Dollery, 2000). Since Aristotle argued that the civic friendship upon which the common good depended could not be achieved in cities with more than 100,000 citizens, theorists of participatory democracy have continually asserted that small is beautiful for efficacious engagement with politics and policy making (Newton, 1982; Sharpe, 1970). At the same time, public choice theory suggests that due to the pressures posed by greater inter-jurisdictional competition and residential mobility small and numerous units of government are more responsive to citizen demands and perform better (Bish & Ostrom, 1973; Ostrom, Tiebout, & Warren, 1961). The small is beautiful school has not however had it all its own way.

Again following Aristotle, the advocates of size point to the greater system capacity of larger governments that allow them to offer a broader range of services, perform their responsibilities to a higher standard and engage with weightier issues (Cheyne & Comrie, 2002; Dahl & Tufte, 1973; Denters, Goldsmith, Ladner, Mouitzen, & Rose, 2014). Contrary to public choice theory, civic reform proponents thus emphasize the

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