

INTRODUCTION

WHO GOVERNS AMERICA?

Many people would say the United States is ruled by the president—as the single office selected by all Americans and the head of the executive branch, the presidency commands more power than any other elected position in the land. Others might say that America is governed by Congress—with its ability to pass legislation, approve executive and judicial appointments, and exercise the “power of the purse,” Congress ultimately wields the upper hand in any political contest. Still others point to big corporations, unions, and other special-interest groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) or the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).¹ These groups “govern” America not only through the direct lobbying of the various branches of government, but also in their ability to shape elections. Because candidates for congress and the presidency are so dependent on the efforts and campaign contributions of such interest groups, they repeatedly bow to their preferences.

This debate is probably familiar to most readers. It has animated American political discourse since the writing of the Federalist Papers. It speaks to fundamental concerns over the distribution of power and popular governance. It dominates the coverage of politics in the popular media. And its focus on national politics encapsulates the way most people conceptualize American governance. But this debate also suffers from a major problem—it overlooks an enormous part of America’s governing structure.

Outside of Washington, there exists a largely unrecognized political entity that exerts an enormous influence on American society. It accounts for over \$1.6 *trillion* in spending every year, roughly a quarter of the nation’s gross domestic product. It collects more

¹ The amount of political writings on this topic are too numerous to document, but some recent notable examples include Bartels 2008, Hacker and Pierson 2010, and Frank 2004.

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revenue than the federal government does in income taxes.² And, arguably, its daily decisions have a more direct impact on Americans than most of the laws and regulations made in Washington, D.C. It tells us where we can live, how we can dress, what we can eat, and how we can act in both public and private places.³

This political behemoth is local government and if we want to know “who governs” America, then we need to look beyond the forces that shape national politics and include the factors that influence local politics as well, particularly local elections. In doing this, however, we run into an immediate problem: we know comparatively little about local government and electoral politics in the United States. The overwhelming majority of people who make their living studying politics, such as political scientists, pollsters, pundits, and journalists, focus mostly on national elections. Rarely do they pay much attention to local contests. In fact, over the past fifty years, nearly *all* the published scientific research on American electoral behavior has focused on presidential or congressional races.⁴

Although these experts have developed very good models of presidential and congressional elections, their explanations are actually ill suited for explaining local voting behavior.⁵ National elections tend to hinge on partisan loyalties, candidate charisma, retrospective evaluations of economic conditions, and voters’ stances on a few key issues. These factors are of limited applicability to local elections for several reasons: most are nonparti-

² This does not include payroll deductions for Social Security and Medicare.

³ If one thinks such a statement is hyperbole, consider just the zoning ordinances, liquor and food regulations, and public decency laws that are enforced by most municipalities.

⁴ Berry and Howell (2007) estimate that fewer than 1 percent of articles on voting behavior in the top political science journals between 1980 and 2000 were on local voting.

⁵ Not only do we know who is likely to win the presidency months before an election, we can also predict, with a better than 90 percent accuracy rate, how any individual is likely to vote based on just four pieces of information. Looking at cumulative data from the American National Election Studies, we find that a two-party model of vote choice correctly predicts 92 percent of variance in voter behavior where the dependent variable is support for the Democratic candidate, and the explanatory variables are a five-point party identification scale, a combined feeling thermometer for the Democratic and Republican candidates, a retrospective evaluation of the economy over the preceding year, and stances on abortion and on spending for the environment and foreign aid.

san; the criteria for judging incumbents' performance are unclear; contentious issues are often hard to identify; and, unlike national contests, we don't have much of an understanding about what voters actually know about local candidates and issues. Most explanations of national voting not only are inappropriate for most local elections but also cannot account for why so many are uncontested, explain what drives evaluations of incumbents, or simply define the broader contours of local politics. While we may know a lot about how and why people vote for president, when it comes to explaining why Jane Smith beat Frank Jones for local supervisor, the best that most voting experts can offer is mere speculation.

Unfortunately, the few existing studies of local elections are not very helpful either because they focus almost exclusively on voting in large cities. Indeed, most of what we know about local politics comes from the study of New York, New Haven, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and a few other cities; meanwhile most Americans live in places that are much different from these big, urban centers. As illustrated in figure I.1, three in four Americans live in a community under 100,000 in size.⁶ Few of these places have the racial and economic diversity of a New York or Los Angeles. Few have their own airports, convention centers, public housing, newspapers, television stations, or hospitals. Nor do they typically have the corporate headquarters or large-scale business enterprises found in bigger cities. Given these differences, elections in Atlanta, Chicago, or Los Angeles will be more the exception than the typical case of local politics in America. In short, if we want to understand "who governs" America, we need to consider electoral politics in the smaller towns and cities where a majority of Americans actually reside.

This, however, presents us with a very big challenge—how do we compare the nearly 90,000 local governments that exist in the United States? America is not just differentiated by national and

⁶ Given the large number of "suburbs" with populations over 100,000, these figures actually inflate the percent of Americans living in "cities" as most people traditionally think of them.

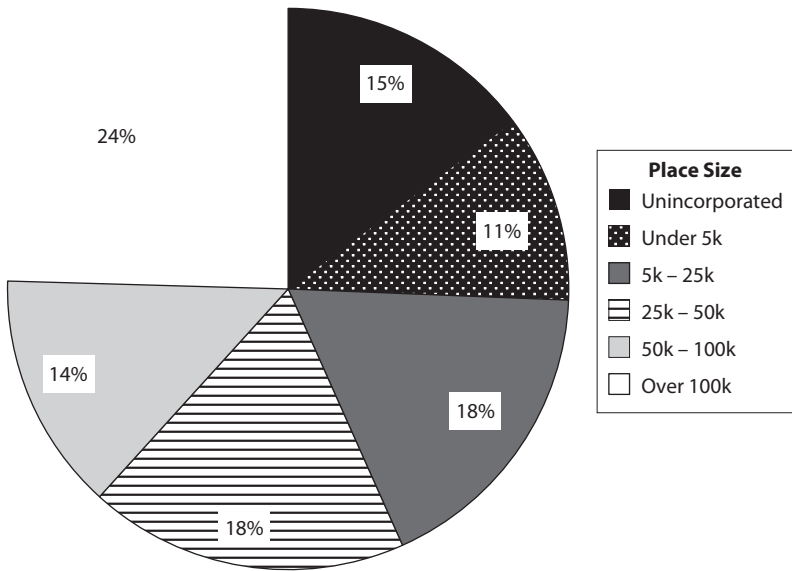


Figure I.1. Distribution of the American population by place size. *Source:* 2000 U.S. Census, STF3C.

local governments or even by big cities and small towns, but by a plethora of smaller local municipalities, counties, school districts, and other special district governments. These smaller governments exhibit an incredible diversity in their size, economic and social composition, and civic and political institutions, a diversity that should also affect their local politics. One would expect that elections in affluent Malibu, California should be very different from gritty, industrial Riverdale, Illinois or bucolic Brenham, Texas. But how can we compare places that are so distinct without getting lost in each of their peculiarities? How can we identify “who governs” America when Americans live in so many types of places and under so many types of government? This book seeks to provide an answer.

We start this inquiry by first stepping back and viewing local politics through a wide conceptual lens. Before we can understand local elections, we need to identify what characteristics differentiate local governments from national governments and from one another. In other words, among the entire universe of democratic

governments, including nations, states, counties, municipalities, and special districts, what are the traits that are most important for distinguishing them from each other and shaping their politics? In chapter 1, we identify three such traits: *size*, *scope*, and *bias*. If we were to compare all the democratic governments in the world, we can predict a lot about voters, candidates, campaigns, and the dynamics of vote choice if we know how many constituents they have (their *size*), how much power is in their offices (their *scope*), and how evenly they distribute their resources among their members (their *bias*). Electoral politics are much different in larger democracies than smaller ones, in broad-ranging institutions than narrow ones, and in democracies that direct resources to particular groups rather than those that distribute them universally.

Where a democracy resides on each of these three dimensions will determine whether ideological or civic-minded politicians run for office; whether citizens are mobilized to vote by racial appeals, financial incentives, or civic duty; and whether voters will base their decisions on issues, candidate charisma, partisanship, or other factors. Larger democracies, for instance, simply by having more people in them, are also more likely to have more potential candidates with the ambition or drive to seek leadership posts. Democracies that have greater scope are likely to foster more ideologically motivated candidates and parties. And, as democracies become more biased, their elections become more “partisan” in the sense that there are now groups who are divided in a zero-sum competition over collective resources. Not only can *size*, *scope*, and *bias* explain the political differences between the nations of Bermuda and Botswana or between the nation of India and the town of Ipswich, but also among the town of Riverdale, the county of Riverside, and the Rosewood School District.

With this theoretical framework in hand, we can then turn our attention back to the question of “who governs” and what differentiates the electoral politics of municipalities under 100,000 in size, what will henceforth be known as *local* governments.⁷

⁷ It is important to recognize this definition of local government as distinct from “urban” government, which I would define as any place above 100,000 in population size.

Because of their differences in *size*, *scope*, and *bias*, the factors that shape electoral politics in most local elections are very different than those in presidential, state, or even big city contests. The United States, for example, is a country high in size, scope, and bias. Its elections are massive undertakings, involving tens of millions of citizens voting for offices with nearly unlimited powers and for stakes that are highly differentiated across the population (i.e., interest groups like senior citizens and farmers get a disproportionately high level of federal revenue compared to most average Americans). These characteristics are manifest in the country's electoral politics: most voters base their choices on general heuristics like party or candidate charisma; parties and candidates are divided by enduring ideological and economic cleavages; and elections are fiercely contested by an array of interest groups seeking to expand or protect their privileges.

Local elections, by contrast, are more intimate affairs usually involving less than a few thousand voters deciding on offices with limited powers and for stakes that are often undifferentiated for an entire constituency (i.e., most residents in a town, for example, get relatively equal levels of fire and police protection). The remainder of the book examines how these differences influence the character of local electoral politics. Through a combination of case studies, national surveys, aggregate statistics, a study of Chicago-area politicians, and a unique survey of voters in thirty localities, we will examine how the *size*, *scope*, and *bias* of America's municipalities influences who turns out in local elections (chapter 2), who runs for local office (chapter 3), when and why local incumbents win or lose (chapter 4), and what shapes individual vote choice (chapter 5). Together, these empirical chapters will show how local elections differ both in regard to national elections and among each other.

The primary difference between national and local elections is that while the former are highly ideological, the latter are *managerial* in character. In a "managerial democracy" electoral politics

Thus while the study of local politics typically focuses on the politics of big cities, for the purposes of this book "local" will refer to those smaller municipalities that are typically overlooked.

are primarily about the custodial performance of incumbent regimes. When Americans vote for a mayor, city council member, or association officer with few powers and a limited jurisdiction, their electoral behavior primarily will be a referendum on that person's managerial competence (or guesses about his or her future managerial competence). In most circumstances, incumbents will be successful if they simply maintain a preexisting equilibrium between taxes and services and if they can avoid major scandals or faux pas. This seemingly low bar of performance is attributable to the nature of elected office in most managerial democracies, which consists of little or no pay, demanding work, and limited opportunities for major initiatives. Not surprisingly, incumbents in managerial democracies often run unopposed and enjoy high rates of reelection.

Unlike national offices, the politics of local governments are rarely fought along ideological lines. Whereas debates among “liberal” and “conservative” elites dominate national and state politics, most local governments are not amenable venues for contesting liberal, conservative, or any other ideological visions of social organization. Most American towns do not sustain the chronic political cleavages of states or the country, partly because losing sides to any political battle can easily “exit.” In other words, a conservative voter can easily move out of a liberal town, a disaffected community can seek to secede from a larger city, and so on. This is not to suggest that major political or ideological conflict will never emerge in all localities; rather, such struggles are likely to be more of an exception than the rule.

When political conflict does arise in most local governments, it will typically be over issues that are parochial and temporal in nature. Although local politics tend to focus on broad issues of land and economic development, the specific issues that animate local politics are likely to be particular to a certain place and time. For instance, a town may be divided over a proposal to build a new shopping center, but this same fight is unlikely to be found across all towns or even in the same place five years down the road. The parochial nature of small-scale democracy, however, does not mean that local politics are meaningless or shallow. One

of the most common misperceptions about local politics is that, in the absence of traditional ideological conflict, their issues are insignificant and that voters are apolitical. In fact, just the opposite is more often true—local voters are much more likely to embody the classical notions of an informed and rational *polis* than are national voters.

This paradox is largely attributable to the selective differences in electoral participation. Local elections are populated largely by long-term residents and homeowners, what economist William Fischel (2005) has elegantly termed “homevoters.” Not only are “homevoters” much more likely to vote, they are also better informed and more engaged in local politics than the average voter in national elections. Because of this, contested local elections are less likely to be decided by general heuristics like party affiliation or candidate attractiveness—the mental shortcuts that drive voting behavior in most national or state contests. Instead, as previously noted, they tend to revolve around managerial performance or issues specific to a particular place and time. In short, when issues and conflict do arise in local elections, they are likely to be decisive in local politics precisely because of the types of people who turn out to vote.

Ironically, the highly engaged nature of the local *polis* also makes it exceedingly difficult to predict when and where specific issues are likely to emerge in an election and how they will get translated into particular voting behaviors. Unlike national elections, which are defined by long-standing political cleavages, local politics, for a variety of reasons, have fewer chronic issues that divide the citizenry. The absence of perpetual conflict often may give the appearance of political tranquility, but it masks the latent potential for political furor. Because citizens’ local political involvement is predicated so highly on strong emotional attachments to their communities, a political firestorm can be triggered by what may seem to be the most trivial of causes, particularly to an outsider. A mayor may suddenly face a challenger because of a decision to cut down a particular tree or a city council member may lose reelection for making an off-handed remark about a particular constituent. Then

again, they may not. The difficulty for both locally elected officials (and those of us who seek to understand local elections) is that it is very hard to know when such a decisive event will arise. Like volcanic eruptions, local politics tends to be dominated by periods of general calm that are occasionally, and seemingly randomly, punctuated by intense tumult.

In addition to identifying what differentiates national and local elections, our empirical investigations also reveal differences among local elections, many of which are attributable to variation in their relative *size*, *scope*, and *bias*. Although local governments are relatively similar in each of these dimensions, especially compared to national governments, they are not identical in these ways. America's municipal governments can hold eight citizens or eight million; they can provide a wide range of public services or few; they can be rife with political patronage and favoritism or be governed in a universalistic manner. These distinctions have important political consequences. For example, elections in larger places involve more ambitious candidates and large-scale mobilization efforts, while voters in smaller places are more likely to know candidates personally and base their votes on this knowledge. Incumbents in towns that provide more government services are more vulnerable than those in municipalities that provide fewer government services, a by-product of their greater scope. Similarly, elections in poor communities (which tend to be more biased) are more fiercely contested than elections in wealthy places (which tend to be less biased).

Together these findings call into question the common characterization of local politics as being dominated by propertied elites preoccupied with economic development; rather, it is more appropriate to characterize local politics as being dominated by propertied masses. To appreciate this point, it is important to consider how we understand local government. Ironically, the question of "who governs?" used to be asked primarily in relation to local politics (Dahl 1961). Fifty years ago, scholars fiercely debated whether America's local democratic institutions allowed for meaningful self-governance or whether they were simply another device used

by the affluent and propertied classes to uphold their economic and social privileges. However, when looking at the entirety of American localities through the conceptual lens of *size*, *scope*, and *bias*, it is clear that most theories about community power that arose from these debates are suitable only for a handful of large, urban cities. Although property development and environmental considerations are almost always the central preoccupations of local politics, in most places there is not a rapacious “growth machine” (e.g., Logan and Molotch 1987) setting the municipal agenda. Nor do most places witness shifting constellations of various political interests trying to come together in a “governing regime” to accomplish major public works (Stone 1989). Rather, the political terrain of most American localities is defined by the concerns of local stakeholders with the quality of their living environments, the maintaining of property values, and the balance between low taxes and basic service provision. The small size, limited scope, and low bias of most places greatly attenuate most of the political cleavages that fracture large, urban places.

Viewed through the lens of size, scope, and bias, we can also appreciate why local governments are not effective venues for redressing most deep social or economic cleavages. Although political activists across the ideological spectrum often look to local grassroots action as a vehicle for empowerment, the narrow scope and low bias of most local democracies greatly inhibit the pursuit of any ideologically driven goals. While an activist city council may pass the occasional ordinance against global warming or seek to ban books on evolution from public libraries, the main expenditures and tasks of local governance (e.g., fire and police protection, water and waste management, zoning and street maintenance) simply do not leave a great deal of discretionary resources or leeway for advancing a broader social agenda, particularly in regard to larger visions about the scope of government in society.

Given that dominant theories about local politics seem ill-suited for explaining the electoral dynamics of most American localities, what can we say about the perennial question of “who governs?” Although this book does not provide any simple answers, it does provide a framework for the reader to reconsider this question

from a new perspective. In other words, by reexamining local government in terms of their *size*, *scope*, and *bias*, we can restate the question of “who governs” as a question of how does changing the size, scope, or bias of a small-scale democracy affect the ability of its citizens to govern themselves? Or, more importantly, to what extent does changing the size, scope, and bias of a municipality fundamentally alter the distribution of power and resources within a locality?