
Sprawl, Politics, and Participation: A Preliminary Analysis

Thad Williamson

Advocates of smart growth and other policies intended to constrain urban sprawl increasingly cite a desire to rebuild community as a primary objective of, and rationale for, reshaping America's built environment. Authors Kaid Benfield, Jutka Terris, and Nancy Vorsanger write in their fine book *Solving Sprawl* that "smart growth helps restore a sense of community by building more compact neighborhoods that are walkable, with sidewalks and safe crossings as well as home and shop entrances close enough to the street to be convenient and inviting."¹ Recent publications of the Congress for the New Urbanism stress themes of "building social capital" and "reviving community" in making the case for pedestrian-friendly places modeled on a small town downtown, not on a strip mall.

These claims by New Urbanist scholars and their allies have an intrinsic plausibility; a place that looks and feels like a coherent community should help produce citizens who are better able to identify with where they live and are more engaged in civic and political life. New Urbanists can also point to a handful of studies that seem to reinforce these claims. Perhaps most impressively, Robert Putnam's analysis of national data on civic participation concluded that a ten-minute increase in the average commuting time of a locality is associated with roughly a 10 percent decline in the rate of civic participation in that locale.²

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Other scholars of American civic life, however, have been less impressed with the strength of the existing evidence. J. Eric Oliver, in his book *Democracy in Suburbia*, notes “most assertions about suburban civic life are based on either pure speculation or case studies of individual places done in the 1950s and 1960s.”³ Oliver’s analysis of data on local political participation in American communities found that smaller cities as well as economically diverse cities are more likely to have a rich civic and political life. But Oliver also concluded that after controlling for socioeconomic composition, “there are few remaining social behaviors that systematically vary with a community’s land use.”⁴ What is most damaging about American-style suburbanization, Oliver suggests, is not that more Americans now live in a bedroom community but that Americans are increasingly geographically segregated, especially by class, producing a society in which denizens of a high-income suburb need never deal with the problems of poorer citizens concentrated in older urban neighborhoods.

Oliver does not completely shut the door on claims that the geographic and physical features associated with sprawl may negatively affect civic life, but his work makes it clear that common New Urbanist hypotheses about this possible impact need to be subjected to much closer scrutiny. Building on both Oliver’s work and that of Putnam and other scholars, I am currently engaged in a research project that picks up this task, drawing on a remarkable set of data recently collected by the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Life at Harvard University combined with data from the 1990 and 2000 national censuses as to local community characteristics. The Saguaro Seminar conducted interviews in 2000 with nearly thirty thousand Americans, 90 percent of whom live in one of forty distinct geographic settings (thirty-eight urban areas and two rural regions), about their civic and social habits. The urban regions that are part of this data set range from cities often associated with sprawl (such as Charlotte, Atlanta, and Houston) to metropolitan areas with high density (such as San Francisco). These cities vary widely in their rate of political participation; for instance, residents of the San Francisco area are more than three times as likely, compared to Houston-area residents, to belong to a political organization or to have signed a petition or attended a political demonstration in the previous twelve months. It is possible to analyze this data at multiple geographic levels, from census tract to city level, which permits a highly detailed examination of the impact of local spatial characteristics on America’s civic life.

Research and commentary to date on the possible relationship between sprawl and civic behavior has suffered not only from a lack of data but also from insufficient conceptual clarity. A critical first step is to disaggregate the array of community characteristics that are often grouped together under the common label of sprawl. For instance, critics of America’s suburbs have repeatedly identified certain community features as evidence of sprawl: low population density, high reliance on automobiles, and a long commuting time. But these three characteristics are not all positively correlated with one another;

residents of a higher-density city typically have a longer commuting time (probably because of congestion) than residents of a low-density city, and suburban environments as a whole have only a slightly longer commuting time than a central city does. It makes little sense, then, to assume that the concerns raised by New Urbanists and others can be described as part of a unified phenomenon called sprawl. Disaggregating spatial features of a community allows the researcher to test whether specific community characteristics might have differing effects on various forms of civic participation and social capital.

In research in progress, I am examining the effects of several community characteristics on civic engagement:

- Central city residence
- Population density
- Transportation patterns
- Commuting time (for both individuals and neighborhoods)
- Neighborhood age

I use seven measures of political engagement:

1. Participation in protest-type activity
2. Petition signing
3. Attending a partisan political meeting
4. Belonging to a group engaged in local reform efforts
5. Belonging to a political organization
6. Interest in politics
7. Voting in national elections

I also am testing the impact of various community characteristics on additional measures of social capital, such as public meeting attendance, group membership, friendship ties, and social trust; as well as satisfaction with one's community and self-reported individual well-being. It is important to consider multiple kinds of political participation (confrontational nonelectoral participation, nonconfrontational nonelectoral participation, and electoral participation) as well as goods other than political participation; surely a high degree of civic and political engagement is not the only important quality a healthy neighborhood or city should exhibit.

I offer first a brief overview of the main findings to date.

Central City Residence

American suburbs have frequently been portrayed as politically quiescent places free from the drama and conflict associated with big-city politics. This picture is in part confirmed by the Saguaro data; a simple comparison of the rate of political participation between central-city residents and suburban

residents shows that central-city residents are more likely to be engaged in politics, particularly some conflict-oriented forms, and more likely to state that they are interested in politics. Indeed, in some ways this initial comparison understates the impact of suburbanization; as Eric Oliver has observed, other things being equal, one would expect suburban residents to be *more* engaged in politics than central-city residents since they tend to be better educated, own their own home, and have a higher income (all well-established predictors of individual-level political participation).

The importance of central-city residence for engagement in politics is confirmed and strengthened by multivariate analyses that control for a range of individual characteristics (age, gender, race, educational status, income, marital status, number of children in household, employment status and hours spent at work, homeownership status, television-watching habits, and whether or not one lives in the American South). The analyses reported here also control for a number of communitywide characteristics (by zip code), including the percentage of government workers in residence (a modest positive predictor of local political participation), median income, and the degree of economic and racial diversity. Finally, these analyses also include controls for individual commuting time as well as neighborhood-level commuting time (the impact of commuting is considered in its own right later).

My initial analysis shows that residence in a central-city location (as opposed to an inner suburb, an outer suburb, or a rural location) is a statistically significant predictor (at the 95 percent confidence level) of an individual's membership in a political organization, and a highly significant predictor (at the 99 percent confidence level) of voting in a national election, attending marches and demonstrations, belonging to a local reform organization, and interest in politics. Central-city residents also tend to be somewhat more likely to have signed a petition or attended a partisan political meeting in the past twelve months, although the impact of central-city residence falls short of statistical significance in these cases.

It is equally important to note, however, which forms of social capital central-city residence does *not* seem to enhance. Central-city residence has no significant impact (positive or negative) on attendance at public meetings (such as PTA events), the number of groups one belongs to, how many close friends one has, how trusting one is of other people, or how alienated one feels from a community's leadership. (Both central-city and suburban residents are less likely to trust others than rural residents, however.) The positive impact of central-city residence seems to apply specifically to political activities, not social capital more generally—and to apply particularly strongly to relatively contentious forms of political engagement.

A principal mechanism by which central-city residence has this effect appears fairly clear-cut in the data: central-city residents are more interested in politics than suburban residents are, and interest in politics is a strong predictor (naturally) of all forms of participation in politics. Perhaps more is at

stake in the local politics of a large city compared to a suburb; perhaps a city has greater social and class conflict than a smaller place; perhaps the personalities associated with central-city politics are more compelling and more likely to be familiar to the public, not least because central-city politics is likely to dominate media coverage of local events in any metropolitan area. Perhaps, too, there are issues of self-selection involved in the linkage between central-city residence and increased interest in politics; people who are more interested in politics may gravitate toward a central city. I tested for this possibility by including “interest in politics” as an additional control; although adding this control dilutes the impact of central-city residence on political participation, it does not eliminate it—indeed, central-city residence remains a statistically significant predictor of belonging to a reform organization or attending a demonstration even *after* controlling for interest in politics.

Solo Commuting

We now turn to more specific community characteristics, starting with transportation patterns. The culture of the solo commuter driver in the American metropolitan area has been a top target of New Urbanist writers, and a study by Lance Freeman at Columbia University has shown that high dependence on automobile use appears to be linked to weakened neighborhood social ties.⁵ Could transportation patterns be similarly linked to political participation as well as social capital more generally?

Preliminary evidence indicates that the answer is yes. Using the same battery of control variables just noted, but without controlling for central-city residence, I tested the impact of driving patterns on political participation using as a measure the percentage of commuters in a given zip code who do *not* drive themselves to work alone but instead carpool, use public transportation, bicycle, or walk. My initial analyses show that the lower the percentage of solo commuters in one’s zip code, the more likely an individual is to belong to a political organization, be a part of a local reform organization, attend a partisan political meeting, attend a demonstration, sign a petition, or vote.

This finding is even more impressive when one considers that transportation use patterns are *not* a significant predictor of interest in politics. Consequently, the relationship between fewer solo drivers and greater participation in politics continues to hold even after one controls for an individual’s interest in politics.

An intriguing question, of course, is *why* a transportation pattern should have this impact on political activity. One broad possibility is that the transportation pattern is in fact a proxy for the spatial layout of a metropolitan area. Another possibility is that the act of transportation itself has an impact on an individual’s propensity to be engaged in politics (by making a public-transit user more aware of the diversity of one’s community, for instance, or by allowing carpoolers the chance to converse with one another); another possibility is

that a less-auto-dominated community permits greater accessibility to citizens who want to go to meetings or attend demonstrations. Still another possibility is that what is really driving this finding is the correlation between central-city residence (which predicts higher political participation) and mass transit use. Later in this article, I consider the results from models that simultaneously test multiple community characteristics while controlling for central-city residence.

The Mixed Blessing of Population Density

Sprawl is often technically defined as a process of urban development in which population density (residents per square mile) decreases over time, as outward development of land exceeds population increase in the metropolitan region. According to a 2001 Brookings Institution study, population density fell in 264 out of 281 American metropolitan regions between 1980 and 1999.⁶ Does this reduction in density have negative implications for Americans' political engagement?

Evidence from the Saguario survey suggests that it may—to some extent. First, it should be noted that the impact of density (if any) is not likely to be linear; we may think of a big city as a place where local politics is likely to be highly contested and organized, but Americans have also regarded the rural community or very small town as a place likely to be friendly to social capital and active participation in local affairs. To test the possible impact of population density on political engagement, I divided respondents in the Saguario survey into five categories, ranging from very-high-density census tracts (9,999 or more persons per square mile) to very-low-density census tracts (fewer than 500 persons per square mile).

Living in a very-high-density area is a positive predictor at a statistically significant level of membership in a political organization, attending a march or demonstration, and signing a petition. This impact of very high density holds up even after one controls for central-city residence status (indicating that this effect is not simply reducible to central-city residence *per se*) and an individual's interest in politics. Residence in a very high density area also tends to be associated with membership in a local reform group, although the relationship falls just short of statistical significance. On the other hand, living in a very-high-density area has no significant effect on voting, attendance at partisan political meetings, or even interest in politics.

One plausible explanation for this finding is that very-high-density living facilitates political organization by reducing the relative costs of organizing; geographical proximity makes it easier to get the word out or to find like-minded citizens. A less generous explanation is that living in a very-high-density area produces greater social tension and conflict, which in turn motivates participation in conflictual forms of politics. These possible explanations are not mutually exclusive, but it should also be noted that the finding

that very high density may influence the rate of political activity is only indirectly relevant to the question of whether a sprawling suburb is more likely than a more compact suburb to promote political engagement. Those living in a low-density urban area (five hundred to three thousand persons per square mile) are generally less likely than those living in a moderate-density area (three thousand to seven thousand persons per square mile) to participate in politics, but in no instance is the effect statistically significant. What seems to matter is living in a very-high-density area (as in the middle of San Francisco or several other cities), not living in a New Urbanist paradise as opposed to Sprawlsville.

Complicating the picture even further is the fact that very high density can have negative implications for other forms of social capital. Very-high-density residence has a statistically significant negative effect on group membership and social trust and also contributes to greater feelings of alienation from one's community. Very high density also has a quite strong negative impact on citizens' subjective assessment of both their community's quality of life and their own personal happiness; initial analyses indicate that these negative effects remain largely intact even after one adds controls for the local violent-crime rate (which is positively correlated with higher density). In short, encouraging Americans to live in (or build) very-high-density communities would likely have a positive effect on engagement in certain kinds of politics—but only at the cost of making them less trusting and less happy.

Neighborhood Age

A major challenge in research on sprawl is finding an adequate way to measure the components of it, or a suitable proxy. One indicator that has been suggested as a proxy for neighborhood design is neighborhood age, measured by the median age of the housing stock in a given community. Was a neighborhood mostly built before the 1940s? Or was it mostly built in the 1970s and 1980s? In an intriguing finding, Eric Oliver notes that residing in a younger city in a Sunbelt state appears to be less conducive to local political participation than living in an older city; Oliver believes this effect is probably the result of the car-centered community design in more recently built communities. Another possibility is simply that an older neighborhood has a greater sense of neighborhood identity, and a longer history of activism. Whereas residents of a brand-new neighborhood must create civic organizations from scratch, residents of an older neighborhood can join established groups.

Broad survey-based research alone probably cannot adequately establish why an older neighborhood tends to be more conducive to civic and political participation than a younger neighborhood. The Saguaro survey data indicates quite strongly that this is so, however—and, it appears, not only in the Sunbelt region. My initial analysis indicates that (again, controlling for a battery of individual and community characteristics) residents of neighborhoods built before

1950 are significantly more likely to belong to a political organization, belong to a local reform organization, attend a partisan political event, attend a march or demonstration, vote in a national election, or attend a public meeting—even though living in such an older neighborhood does not increase one's interest in politics. These findings hold even after one controls for central-city residence status (central-city neighborhoods, naturally, tend to be older than suburban neighborhoods). Unlike high population density, an older neighborhood generates no adverse effect on measures of social trust, alienation, or personal happiness; residents of a new neighborhood, however, do tend to rate their community's quality of life higher than residents of an older neighborhood.

Much more additional research, probably involving in-depth examination of specific communities, is needed in future years to make sense of this apparent impact of neighborhood age on political participation. As it stands, this finding is consistent with the common New Urbanist view that neighborhood design in the United States changed in the postwar era in a way that damaged civic health; but it also suggests the broader value of preserving existing neighborhoods and the social capital networks that lie within them. Age has its advantages.

Commuting Time

The final suburbanization-related characteristic to consider is commuting time, both individual and at the neighborhood level. It stands to reason that people who must spend an hour or more a day commuting have less time (and perhaps less energy) for civic affairs. There is also good reason to suspect that the neighborhood-level commuting time is important; even if an individual has a short commute and plenty of time to meet with others, there may be no one else to meet with if all one's neighbors are exhausted from their daily expedition to work.

How well does commuting time predict political participation? Not as well as one might think. Longer individual commuting time has a notable negative impact on only one form of political behavior—voting—and even in this case the effect is quite weak, falling short of statistical significance. Neighborhood-level commuting time (when controlling for individual commute time) has no tangible impact on political behavior.

This is not to say that commuting has no effect on social capital, but it packs a punch outside the political arena. Long commuting time for an individual is a very strong predictor of reduced number of friends and attendance at public meetings and a modestly strong predictor of reduced social trust and reduced membership in groups. Interestingly, neighborhood-level (zip code) commuting time is also a very strong predictor of reduced social trust (stronger than individual commuting time, in fact). Finally, commuting time is closely related to an individual's subjective well-being; those people with a long commuting time tend to be both less happy personally and less happy with their community.

In short, the evidence is quite clear that a shorter commute time is strongly desirable for both human well-being and certain forms of social capital. There is little reason to believe, however, that reducing commuting time would significantly affect either Americans' interest or their participation in explicitly political activities.

Putting It All Together

We have now independently considered the impact (or lack thereof) of five types of community characteristics related to spatial organization: central-city status, transportation patterns, density, neighborhood age, and commuting time. All save for commuting have been shown to have an impact on at least some forms of political participation, but which of these community characteristics have the strongest effect?

To begin to answer this question, I have conducted preliminary analyses in which the impact of each community characteristic (some of which are correlated with one another) is tested simultaneously (controlling for the other individual and community characteristics previously noted). Perhaps surprisingly, the most consistent predictor of increased participation in politics in this combined analysis, by far, is reduced dependence on the automobile. Fewer solo commuters in one's zip code is a statistically significant predictor of membership in a political organization, membership in a local reform organization, attending a partisan political meeting, signing a petition, and attendance at public meetings—even when controlling for other community characteristics with which reduced auto dependence is highly correlated. In most cases, these relationships remain statistically significant after controlling for individual interest in politics.

This preliminary analysis thus suggests that there is good reason, from a civic point of view, to encourage forms of community design that reduce commuting time and to encourage the preservation and increased livability of both our older neighborhoods and our central cities. (The case for increased density per se, however, is much more ambiguous.) However, the biggest payoff, at least from a political participation point of view, appears to be in getting Americans out of their cars. The precise reason this is the case is open to interpretation, but the attachment of Americans to their automobiles is an apt metaphor for the privatization of Americans' way of life. Indeed, getting Americans out of their cars would probably prove an even more challenging endeavor than placing jobs closer to people or shoring up our cities.

Moreover, the substantive impact of these community characteristics on political participation and social capital should not be exaggerated. In most cases, it would take changes in the spatial environment that stretch the limits of policy plausibility (such as effecting a 10 percent reduction in the number of solo commuters, or encouraging systematic resettlement of a central-city area) to affect Americans' civic and political behavior in any

tangible way. Nor are these spatial characteristics more consistent predictors of American political participation than socioeconomic characteristics. Confirming (and indeed strengthening) the conclusions of previous research by Eric Oliver, my analyses indicate that economic diversity at the local level (measured here as the propensity of poor and affluent households to live in the same zip code) is a positive predictor of interest in politics and every form of political participation considered, except voting in national elections.

These findings should be understood as preliminary results. I have relied in part on data from the 1990 census; future work will fully incorporate the latest geographic data from the 2000 census as they became available and also test these results using a variety of additional statistical techniques. The findings noted here indicate, however, that although community spatial characteristics do appear to have measurable impact on political participation, the size of the impact is not overwhelming in most cases, particularly when one considers the difficulty, from a policy point of view, of effecting large changes in the nature of America's built environment. Even if one takes the long view and suggests that the question is not whether the built environment can be changed overnight but instead whether it might be shaped over the next twenty to thirty years in ways that are more conducive to political engagement, another problem must be confronted soberly: the change likely to produce the most payoff in increasing political participation, namely, finding ways to get Americans out of their cars, is also the change likely to encounter the most spirited resistance, both from affected industries and from ordinary Americans.

Notes

1. Benfield, K., Terris, J., and Vorsanger, N. *Solving Sprawl*. Washington, D.C.: Natural Resources Defense Council, 2002.
2. Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.
3. Oliver, E. *Democracy in Suburbia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 4.
4. Oliver (2001), p. 152.
5. Freeman, L. "The Effect of Sprawl on Neighborhood Social Ties: An Explanatory Analysis." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Winter 2001, pp. 67–77.
6. Fulton, W., Pendall, R., Nguyen, M., and Harrison, A. "Who Sprawls Most? How Growth Patterns Differ Across the United States." Brookings Institution, July 12, 2001. Washington, D.C.

Thad Williamson is a doctoral student in the Department of Government at Harvard University and coauthor of Making a Place for Community: Local Politics in a Global Age (Routledge Press).