

Local Politics, Organized Interests, and Land-Use Policy: A Research Note Analyzing the Perceptions of Urban Planners Working in City Government

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Eric Heberlig¹, Suzanne Leland¹,
and Dustin Read²

Abstract

This research note examines the influence of organized interests in the land-use policy-making process from the perspective of urban planners employed in city government. Perceptions of these professionals are evaluated using a series of regression models controlling for the mitigating effects of government structure, mayoral partisanship, community characteristics, and the personal attributes of the respondents participating in the research. The results suggest that the aggregate influence of organized interests is more pronounced in cities with mayors when compared with cities with council–manager government structures. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the presence of a partisan mayor can increase the aggregate influence of organized interests, as well as mitigate the amount of influence garnered by specific groups. These findings contribute to the study of urban development

¹University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA

²Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Dustin Read, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0002, USA.

Email: dcread@vt.edu

by offering new insight into the relationship between local politics, organized interests, and land-use policy.

Keywords

interest groups, land-use policy, local government, urban planning

Introduction

Land-use regulations enacted by local governments have a profound impact on urban landscapes, yet relatively little is known about the political nature of these policy decisions or the role organized interests play in the process. These issues are addressed in the following research note using survey data collected from members of the American Planning Association (APA). Perceptions of interest group influence are evaluated after controlling for the mitigating effects of government structure, mayoral partisanship, community characteristics, and the personal attributes of planners. Descriptive statistics suggest some groups, such as businesses and neighborhood associations, are perceived as particularly influential when land-use policies are made. Aggregate interest group influence is also perceived to be greater in cities with mayors when compared with cities with council–manager governments. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the presence of a partisan mayor mitigates both the aggregate influence of interest groups and the amount of influence held by specific types of groups. All of these findings are noteworthy because they contribute to an ongoing debate in the scholarly literature regarding the importance of organized interests in local politics (Cooper, Nownes, and Robert 2005).

On one end of the spectrum, there are scholars who believe organized interests play only a marginal role in influencing local policy decisions. If any of these groups matter, they will serve business interests as opposed to other policy issues because cities are not in a position to take up redistributive causes (Peterson 1981). At the same time, other theorists contend that organized interests, including those outside the realm of economic development, can and do affect local policy outcomes (Clingermayer and Feiock 2001; Dahl 2005; Elkin 1987; Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1989). The latter proposition appears to hold in the realm of land-use policy, where recent studies have linked the adoption of various regulations to government structure, community attributes, and proxies for organized interest activity (Feiock, Tavares, and Lubell 2008; Lubell, Feiock, and Ramirez de la Cruz 2009; Ramirez de la Cruz 2009). This research note builds upon these studies using a unique data set and methodology to evaluate the attitudes of planners working in city government across the United States.

Method

The data used to complete this study were collected through a self-administered Internet survey distributed nationally to members of the APA over a six-week period (see Measurement Appendix). Nearly 1,500 of the APA's $\pm 42,000$ members completed the survey and the responses received from 432 planners working in city government were used to estimate the models in this article. Responses were received from planners working in nearly every state, as well as from planners working in cities with diverse population densities.¹ Planners' perceptions of interest group influence were deemed worthy of study because these professionals have ongoing access to many of the parties involved in the land-use policy-making process (Calavita and Caves 1994). Their vantage point provides them with unique insight as to which organized interests are influential and which are not. Perceptions of urban planners have even been empirically linked to land-use policy outcomes, suggesting these professionals do in fact hold valuable information about the political nature of local land-use policy decisions (Ramirez de la Cruz 2009).

All of the planners participating in the study were asked to rate the influence of seven organized interests on land-use policy decisions made in the city where they work on a 4-point scale, with a score of "4" representing the highest level of influence and a score of "1" representing the lowest.² These groups included businesses, economic development organizations, environmental groups, homebuilder associations, neighborhood associations, non-profit entities, and Realtors® associations. The average influence rating across these seven groups initially serves as the dependent variable in a series of regression models examining aggregate interest group influence at the local level. Attention is then turned to the factors mitigating the perceived influence of each of the individual groups included in the study.

As for independent variables, two questions were included in the survey to measure planners' perceptions about the importance of politics in the land-use policy-making process and the importance of short-term electoral motivations when planning decisions are made. These questions allowed for the creation of controls for respondents' preconceptions about the political nature of urban planning. Another series of questions was included to measure a respondent's age, gender, race, and political ideology, all of which have been hypothesized to influence planners' professional beliefs (Cooper, Nownes, and Robert 2005; Kaplowitz, Machemer, and Pruetz 2008). As a final step, a zip code question was included in the survey. This allowed for the use of census data to create controls for income and population in the city where each respondent worked. These variables were included to address concerns that groups in favor of growth management policy may be more influential in affluent cities interested in preserving residential property values, while

Table 1. Planners' Average Influence Ratings of Organized Interests (4.0 = High, 1 = Low).

	Average	SD
Businesses	3.00	0.65
Neighborhood groups	2.77	0.88
Economic development agencies	2.64	0.88
Homebuilders associations	2.53	0.92
Environmental groups	2.43	0.82
Nonprofit organizations	2.36	0.76
Realtors® association	2.23	0.84

n = 515–522

progrowth interests may be more influential in larger cities due to intense competition to locate new development near concentrated amenities (Lubell, Feiock, and Ramirez de la Cruz 2009).

The zip code question additionally allowed for the creation of binary variables representing cities with at-large, district, and mixed city council elections. At-large elections were anticipated to increase the influence of environmental groups with broad-based objectives, while limiting the influence of prodevelopment interests with narrower goals (Feiock, Tavares, and Lubell 2008). Binaries were also created to identify council–manager governments and those with a Republican, Democrat, or an Independent mayor elected on a partisan or nonpartisan ballot. The political affiliation of both part-time and full-time mayors was determined using a multistep process, including a search of press releases, candidate and/or city websites, and data from the U.S. Conference of Mayors. These variables were created because the presence of a full-time mayor and partisan elections were anticipated to amplify interest group influence by politicizing the land-use policy-making process and increasing the importance of traditional party alliances (Krebs and Pelissero 2010; Ross and Levine 2001; Svara 2001).

The aforementioned independent variables were first regressed on each respondent's mean ranking across the seven groups to estimate the aggregate influence of organized interests after controlling for the mitigating effects of government structure, mayoral partisanship, community characteristics, and personal attributes. Next, the same independent variables were regressed on the standardized influence ranking for each individual group. Tables 1, 2, and 3 report the results, along with descriptive statistics ranking perceived influence across groups.

Table 2. Analysis of Average Organized Interest's Influence (OLS Regression).

	Column 1		Column 2		Column 3	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Political structures						
Mayor	.22*	.15				
Republican			.19*	.08	.14	.12
Nonpartisan Republican					.21**	.08
Democratic			.25**	.08	.32**	.10
Nonpartisan Democrat					.21**	.08
Independent			.02	.15	.02	.01
Nonpartisan ballot	.01	.06	.03	.03		
At-large	-.20**	.07	-.19*	.07	-.19**	.07
District	-.13	.08	-.13	.08	-.15	.08
Political influence	.13**	.04	.12**	.04	.13**	.04
Electoral influence	-.06	.04	-.06	.04	-.06	.04
Community						
Population (×1,000)	.27*	.10	.19*	.08	.20*	.08
Median income	-.22	.18	-.13	.16	-.14	.16
Respondent characteristics						
White	.02	.10	.02	.10	.03	.10
Male	-.13*	.06	-.14*	.06	-.12*	.06
Liberal	-.01	.06	-.03	.06	-.03	.06
Conservative	-.05	.09	-.05	.09	-.03	.09
Constant	2.16**	.21	2.24**	.21	2.25**	.20
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.14		.14		.16	
<i>N</i> = 432						

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares.

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Results and Discussion

Similar to the findings of Cooper, Nownes, and Roberts (2005), Table 1 indicates that businesses and neighborhood associations are perceived to be the most influential when land-use policies are made. The former result is not surprising because businesses are organized entities capable of turning their resources toward politics when necessary to promote their interests (Logan and Molotch 1987). The latter result is also consistent with theoretical expectations because members of neighborhood associations are geographically

united and have a strong economic incentive to mobilize for or against land-use policies anticipated to impact property values (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993; Cheung and Meltzer 2013; Fischel 2005; Logan and Rabrenovic 1990). Economic development agencies ranked third in influence, presumably because of their close alignment with businesses, while environmental interests and other nonprofit organizations achieved lower rankings (Fischel 2005). Contrary to the view that development interests dominate local politics, homebuilder and Realtors® associations ranked fourth and seventh, respectively, in perceived influence. This suggests “no growth” sentiment may be the default position in many localities, explaining why prodevelopment lobbyists spend considerable effort meeting with citizen groups and offering concessions so that they do not turn out en masse to oppose land-use policies supporting development (Nownes 2006; Purcell 2000).

The results reported in Table 2 provide some evidence that mayors increase interest group influence as perceived by urban planners. Column 1 shows that planners perceived enhanced interest group influence in cities with mayors, as the mayoral variable is positively signed, statistically significant, and obtains one of the highest beta scores.³ Column 2 demonstrates that both Democratic and Republican mayors increase the perceptions of interest group influence relative to Independent mayors and city managers. Given that the partisan label on the ballot is not significant, it suggests that the need for creating access for party allies exists regardless of the presence of partisan signals on the ballot. Column 3 examines the nature of partisan influence further. All five binary variables measuring the partisanship of the mayor and the partisanship on the ballot yield positive beta coefficients in comparison with the omitted category representing pure council–manager governments.⁴ Three of these five coefficients are statistically significant at conventional levels. Aggregate interest group influence is perceived to be greatest in cities with partisan elections and Republican mayors, followed by cities with non-partisan elections and Democratic or Republican mayors, respectively.

On a related note, aggregate interest group influence is perceived to be weaker in cities with at-large city council elections when compared with the omitted category representing mixed elections, offering further evidence that reformed government structures can mitigate the impact of organized interests in ways that are consistent with theoretical expectations. Other statistically significant findings include greater perceptions of interest group influence among planners working in larger cities, as well as among female planners and planners with stronger self-reported attitudes about the political nature of urban planning. The first of these findings may be attributable to the heightened stakes of land-use regulation in larger cities, while the latter two confirm the impact of personal attributes and beliefs on professional attitudes (Alterman and Page 1973; Kaplowitz, Machemer, and Pruetz 2008).

Table 3 summarizes the results of seven ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models estimated to evaluate the perceived influence of individual organized interests, as opposed to aggregated influence. The same independent variables included in the previous model were regressed on planners' standardized ratings of perceived influence. The ratings were standardized to account for the fact that respondents may have different "baselines" for evaluating groups. Standardization was achieved by calculating a respondent's mean rating for all groups and then subtracting out the rating for each individual group.⁵ This allowed for an analysis of whether each group was rated more influential, less influential, or equally influential in comparison with all groups included in the study. As variables included in the models to control for respondent attributes, city characteristics, and city council election structures yielded few significant findings, these results were omitted from Table 3 but not from the overall model. These results are available upon request.

Overall, the results offer only weak support for predictable linkages between specific organized interests and mayoral partisanship. One of the most notable findings is a reduction in the amount of perceived influence held by environmental groups in jurisdictions with Republican mayors elected on either a partisan or nonpartisan ballot. The other results are more difficult to interpret. However, there is some indication that the presence of partisan mayor, irrespective of party affiliation, can increase the perceived influence of groups with strong economic incentives to mobilize, such as neighborhood associations, Realtor® associations, and homebuilder associations, while decreasing the perceived influence of environmental groups and other nonprofit organizations. This pattern holds in several instances irrespective of whether the mayor was elected on a partisan ballot and irrespective of whether the position is full-time or part-time. These findings are consistent with studies espousing the importance of mayoral partisanship and its relationship to organized interests but fall short of linking specific groups to partisan politics at the local level (Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Sharp, Daley, and Lynch 2011).

Conclusion

The empirical results presented in this article demonstrate that some interest groups hypothesized to be influential in local politics, such as businesses and neighborhood organizations, are indeed perceived by planners in the same manner. Perceived influence is certainly not a direct proxy for overall influence, but it does offer an idea of who professional planners anticipate to have clout when land-use policies are made. This may color how valuable government resources are allocated in the area of land-use planning. Furthermore, the results suggest organized interests are perceived to be more influential in

Table 3. Analysis of Individual Organized Interest Group Influence (OLS Regression).

	Economic						
	Development Groups	Neighborhood Associations	Realtors® Associations	Business	Environmental Groups	Homebuilder Association	Nonprofits
Partisan Republican mayor	.169	.295*	.089	.018	-.560**	.049	.053
Nonpartisan Republican mayor	.016	.108	.270**	-.029	-.419**	.62**	-.206*
Nonpartisan Democratic mayor	.065	.110	.185*	-.142	-.111	.287	-.158
Partisan Democratic mayor	-.058	.164	.064	-.191	-.173	.426*	-.129
Administrator	-.109	-.046	.057	.125	.078	.143	-.086
R ²	.049	.03	.031	.012	.11	.06	.02
N	432	432	432	432	432	432	432

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

cities with mayors when compared with cities with council–manager governments. Partisan mayors, in particular, are perceived to increase aggregate interest group influence, while mitigating the influence of specific groups with different economic incentives to mobilize. The results support the contention that local land-use policy decisions are political in nature and often reflect the objectives of competing organized interest.

Many of the aforementioned findings are consistent with previous studies conducted at the local or regional level, lending credibility to the outcomes. However, the results warrant additional exploration before drawing more definitive conclusions. Future research is needed to address the impact of organized groups at the local level. Surveys of elected officials and citizens would be useful to triangulate with planners' perceptions presented in this article. Taking these steps will bolster the results and offer more credible evidence of consistent linkages between land-use policy, organized interest groups, and mayoral politics.

Measurement Appendix

Measures

All measures were drawn from the American Planning Association (APA) survey conducted in 2009 except population and median income of the municipality, which were taken from the U.S. Census, and the partisanship of mayors that was coded from Internet searches; M = mean, SD = standard deviation.

At-Large Elections

A dummy independent variable indicating responses from the question that asks, "How are the members of the local government you work for elected?" 1 = all at-large elections, 0 = other; $M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.42$.

District Elections

A dummy independent variable indicating responses from the question that asks, "How are the members of the local government you work for elected?" 1 = all ward/district elections, 0 = other; $M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.42$.

Electoral Influence

An ordinal independent variable indicating responses from the question that asks level of agreement (1–4) with "The short-term political motives

of elected officials undermine long-range planning objectives”; $M = 1.9$, $SD = 0.86$.

Gender

A dummy independent variable indicating whether the respondent is female or male; 1 = female, 2 = male; $M = 1.6$, $SD = 0.5$.

Interest Groups Ratings

An interval dependent variable indicating responses from the question that asks, “How influential are the following groups when land-use policy is made in the local government where you work?” (very, somewhat, little, no influence). We standardized the ratings when examining each group separately to account for the fact that respondents may have a different “baseline” for evaluating the groups. That is, we averaged the respondent’s ratings of all groups and then subtracted each individual group rating from the average. So we analyze the extent to which each group is rated more influential, less influential, or equally influential compared with the other groups rated by the respondent. Group statistics—Economic development agencies: $M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.9$; Neighborhood associations: $M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.89$; Nonprofit groups: $M = 2.6$, $SD = 0.77$; Realtors®: $M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.86$; Businesses $M = 2$, $SD = 0.69$; Environmental groups: $M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.85$; Homebuilders: $M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.93$. Standardized—Average Economic development agencies: $M = .08$, $SD = 0.71$; Average Neighborhood association: $M = .22$, $SD = 0.68$; Average Realtors®: $M = -0.33$, $SD = 0.54$; Average businesses: $M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.58$; Average Environmental groups: $M = -0.16$, $SD = 0.72$; Average Homebuilders: $M = -0.03$, $SD = 0.68$; Average Nonprofit groups: $M = -1.19$, $SD = 0.59$.

Average Ranking of Groups

An interval dependent variable indicating the mean number of respondent’s interest group influence ratings (economic development agencies excluded); $M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.53$.

Mayoral Partisanship: Partisan Republican/Democrat

A dichotomous variable coded 1 if the respondent indicated that local elections were partisan and Internet searches revealed that the mayor identified as or was registered with the Democratic or Republican parties; *Nonpartisan Republican/Democrat*: A dichotomous variable coded 1 if the respondent

indicated that local elections were nonpartisan and Internet searches revealed that the mayor identified as or was registered with the Democratic or Republican parties; *Independent mayor*: A dichotomous variable coded 1 if the respondent indicated that local elections were nonpartisan and Internet searches revealed that the mayor used an independent or unaffiliated label.

Median Income

An interval independent variable indicating the median income of the municipality according to the 2000 Census; $M = 45,043$, $SD = 16,704$.

Partisan Electoral Structure

A dummy independent variable indicating “Does the political party affiliation of council/commission candidates appear on the ballot in general elections in the local government you work for?” 1 = partisan, 0 = nonpartisan; $M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.47$.

Population Size

An interval independent variable indicating a municipality’s population according to the 2000 Census; $M = 139,395$, $SD = 320,267$.

Political Influence

An ordinal independent variable demonstrating the level of agreement (1–4) with the statement “Political factors have a strong influence on planning decisions”; $M = 1.6$, $SD = 0.81$.

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Notes

1. The American Planning Association does not have detailed information on all of their members to allow for an adequate assessment of response bias. Therefore, the reader must take caution when interpreting these results as representative of city

- planners. The results can, however, serve as a springboard for future research in this area.
2. As the research questions for this study focus on government officials' perceptions about organized interests, the interest group questions were only asked of planners employed by city governments. Thus, it is impossible in this study to assess the extent to which the perceptions of planners working inside and outside government differ.
 3. Arguably, all cities have at least a ceremonial mayor, regardless of the presence of a city manager. In the survey, 20% of city planners responded that their city did not have a mayor. Even if they meant that the mayor was a city council member with ceremonial responsibilities, the response suggests that such an individual would have no independent authority on zoning decisions.
 4. An interaction between the partisanship of the mayor and the partisanship of the ballot would be the ideal test, but the low number of cases mitigates finding any meaningful results. When such an interaction is entered on the main effects for partisan Democratic mayors is statistically significant.
 5. As a result of the standardization process, the subsequent dependent variables usually end in a fraction, thus, making ordinary least squares (OLS) regression a more appropriate estimation technique than ordered logit.

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Author Biographies

Eric Heberlig (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is a professor of political science and public administration at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He is the coauthor of *Congressional Parties, Institutional Ambition, and the Financing of Majority Control*; *How Government Got in Your Backyard*; *American Labor Unions in the Electoral Arena*; *Classics in Congressional Politics*; and numerous articles on

the politics of Congress, interest groups, elections, and campaign finance. He has served as a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association.

Suzanne Leland (PhD, University of Kansas) is a professor of political science and public administration at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the Director of the Gerald G. Fox Master of Public Administration Program. Her research on urban politics and policy appears in journals such as *Public Administration Review*, *American Review of Public Administration*, and the *Journal of Urban Affairs*. She is the coeditor of two books on city–county consolidation.

Dustin Read (PhD, University of North Carolina at Charlotte) is an assistant professor of Real Estate and Property Management at Virginia Tech. His interdisciplinary research on housing, land-use policy, and public–private partnerships appears in journals such as the *American Review of Public Administration*, *Economic Development Quarterly*, and *Real Estate Finance and Economics*.