

# Does Regionalism Detract from Local Democracy? The Impact of Government Scale on Participation

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*One of the major issues in the debate over the merits of centralized and decentralized governing systems in metropolitan areas is the impact of greater centralization on local democracy. Supporters of current fragmented governing systems in urban areas claim that moving to more centralized governments will negatively impact local level democracy. I investigate this claim through research of the literature and empirical observation. Using citizen participation in local government as a proxy for democracy, I analyze the ways people participate in local governance. I analyze the impact on citizen participation from local government fragmentation and the focus on local government efficiency. Factors that are considered in this analysis are the general public apathy, community attachment and local government autonomy.*

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One of the most critical accusations made against reforming local government through consolidation and the establishment of a centralized governing systems in metropolitan areas is that it will reduce citizen accountability, opportunities to participate in governing decisions, and access to political leaders and administrators (Adrian 1961). Benjamin and Nathan (2000) argue that sense of community is an essential element of a viable local/regional governing system. Without it, democracy cannot flourish. Opponents of centralized government argue that the opportunity to participate is the lifeblood of local democracy, and participation is a sign of a vibrant democracy. They maintain that democracy suffers as a result of centralization and therefore is not in the best interests of the nation. They list some of the negative effects as follows:

- There is a lack of identity to a metropolitan-level government and citizens do not participate in a government with which they do not identify.

- Regional government is physically further removed from the citizens, which creates barriers to participation. There is usually a greater demand on one's time and resources to participate in larger, more centralized governments.
- Regional government is more intimidating and less inviting. In smaller, neighborhood-type governments, the possibilities are greater that citizens have a personal relationship with the politicians and the administrators.
- Regional administrators are perceived by the citizens to be more professional, more remote, less available and more difficult to engage. Citizens feel that their input will have little impact.

Proponents for a decentralized governing system point out that the traditional local government system was built on the concept of small, local governments which allowed and encouraged extensive citizen involvement. This concept has been an article of faith in the development of local government, especially in the United States. They claim that tradition, customs, and historical precedent provide powerful support for the concept of community control and preservation of sense of community. The public's desire for local community control is often cited as the major factor in the voters' negative attitude toward regional government (Hamilton 1999).

In the following sections, I explore the impact of government scale on local level democracy. My proxy for democracy is citizen participation including direct participation in governance decisions, voting for representatives, and participation through groups. I investigate the various ways that people participate in local government. I analyze the contentions of regionalists who refute the claims that regional government detracts from local level participation. Factors that are considered in this analysis are the general public apathy, the administrative focus on efficiency, local government fragmentation, community attachment, and local government autonomy.

### **Ways People Participate**

The early philosophers and writers, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Jefferson, claimed that the small, autonomous municipality is the place where communities of like-minded people could come together and make governance decisions. They felt that small populations and compact areas were necessary to enable people to participate in the governing process. The larger the group of people was, the more diverse their interests were and the more difficult it would be to arrive at mutually agreeable and beneficial decisions.

The New England township form of government was the form that most impressed Jefferson and de Tocqueville for its egalitarianism and opportunity for universal participation. This form of government embodied the ideal of an independent and autonomous system of small governments that maximized citizen participation in the governance process. They argued that decisions made at this level were more democratic as more people theoretically could become involved (Gannett, Jr., 2003; Weiher, 1991; Wolman, 1995).

Direct democracy in the early days of settling of America was the major vehicle for

participation. However, as communities expanded and population increased and diversified, the township concept of direct democracy became impractical. Local government became more of a representative government with the citizens entrusting elected representatives to assemble and make governing decisions on behalf of the community. The participatory process continued through associations. The French philosopher Alex de Tocqueville (1835; 1840) in observing American democracy felt that civil society, which he defined as the civic sector, non-profit associations, and social movements, was essential in the preservation and exercise of local democracy. He claimed that the genius of American local democracy was the nature and extent of its civil society. Through civic associations, individuals with little means and contacts were able to exert substantial influence on public policies. A vibrant civil society, according to de Tocqueville, not only provided a means of participating in public life for all citizens but would also ensure that American society would remain egalitarian and not fall under the control of the elite and privileged few. He argued that a vibrant civic life and local democratic institutions existed in tandem. One could not exist without the other.

Civic life continues to be a major – perhaps the major vehicle for participation in government. Recent research and writings by social scientists connect a robust civic life and participation as important elements for local level democracy to flourish (Stark, 2004, 21-35; Haus and Heinelt, 2005). These writers contend that the value of local level participation is not just in voting in elections, but involvement in community affairs is important in helping to define and legitimize policy. Bäck (2006), in summarizing a number of empirical case studies, found that the most common vehicle for citizen participation was through associations. In the cases he summarized, 56 percent of the citizen participation was through associations compared to only 33 percent from individual involvement. Putnam's (1993) study of governance in Italy was a major contribution to the literature on the value of civic associations in fostering local government democracy. He found that the more civic activity a region had, the more democratic its government was. Civic networks overcame barriers of suspicion and mistrust and promoted community-regarding behavior and cooperation in resolution of community issues. He concluded that civic involvement on the basis of shared interests transcended narrow self-interests and promoted cooperative behavior for the good of the whole. The networks of civic associations also serve as a means to balance and check each other so that any resulting public policy is generally in the overall best interest. For example, conservation groups, while advocating for the particular needs of their members, also serve the broader community in promoting wetland protection. In this way, a web of competing interests balances the interests of the conservation groups with the interests of groups pushing economic development.<sup>1</sup>

### **Participation and Regional Government**

The claim by critics of regional governance that democracy would suffer from a move to a more centralized governing system is refuted by those supporting regional government. They argue that local level democracy is not reduced and may actually function better in a more centralized governing system with more meaningful participation and that the rights of all are better protected at the regional level. Swanstrom (2006), for example argues that

small local government does not necessarily nourish democracy. He claims that the size of local government neither fosters nor inhibits local democracy. Decisions to become involved are dependent on the issues. If people are sufficiently concerned with a public policy issue, they will become involved whether the government is large or small. Residents tend to become active in the political process if the elected officials make a decision that is perceived to be contrary to their interests.

Regionalists also refute the claim by the public choice school that citizen participation is not direct or indirect involvement but in exit or the threat of exit. They argue that people seldom relocate when they are dissatisfied with services nor do they move into a community because of knowledge of the level of services in that community. People locate or move for a variety of reasons, but it usually involves a major event in their lives such as marriage, divorce, new baby, promotion, new job, etc. It is seldom because of the level of services. People might complain about their local government and the services and try and change them but that usually revolves around voting out incumbents, not moving. Moreover, it would require substantial numbers of people or businesses to relocate to influence government to alter its policies and services (Hamilton 1999).

Even though conventional wisdom and some research<sup>2</sup> suggest that smaller jurisdictions reduce the barriers to participation with the result that citizens are more involved in local governance, other research indicates that just the opposite occurs. In a comparative study of a centralized and a decentralized metropolitan area, Lyons and Lowery (1989) and Lowery, Lyons, & DeHoog (1992) found that citizens in the centralized area were more involved in governance. They concluded that participation was higher in neighborhoods in the consolidated city because these places have more groups pursuing contradictory goals. They also found that citizen identification to their city was much stronger in the more consolidated metropolitan area than in the decentralized area. Furthermore, citizens living in the area with the more centralized government felt that they had more influence on public policy and that their attitudes on the level of responsiveness of their government were higher than in the decentralized area. They concluded from their research that rather than centralized government reducing involvement and participation, just the opposite occurred.

Bäck (2006) reached similar conclusions. He analyzed participation in 94 urban areas and found that greater centralization at the local level did not reduce citizen participation. In fact, he concluded that centralization tended to enhance citizen participation because the most common type of citizen involvement was through civic associations. He found that civic associations were more pervasive and involved as the size and complexity of government increase. The issues are the incentives that engender participation and involve people, and size and diversity magnify the issues.

Another study of voter turnout in central counties of 12 metropolitan areas in the United States used voting in municipal elections as an indicator of participation. The researchers found that while municipal size had little impact on voter turnout, the degree of municipal concentration had a positive impact. They found that while citizens in smaller communities may share common values and may find it easier to vote, they do not vote in greater numbers than citizens in larger communities. Indeed, the counties with less municipal fragmentation and greater centralization had the highest levels of voter turnout. They

surmised that “when municipalities encompass a larger part of their urban counties, the county level of policy problems becomes internalized within the politics of the city, thereby stimulating increased political participation.” They argued that “fragmented governments facilitate demographic sorting and/or segregation, thereby transforming the electorates of each municipality into more homogeneous grouping in which most of the substance of politics is embedded in boundaries between cities. The result is that citizens are left with either orphan issues lacking a forum in which to be discussed or no need to discuss them because their fellow citizens are just like them” (Kelleher & Lowery, 2004, 746).

Lightbody (2006) claims that the low public participation in small local governments is because there is nothing of substance worth getting involved with other than the level of services. He argues that large, more centralized governments have more substantive issues and their discussions and policies have greater consequence, at times possibly even of national import. There is more interest and participation in larger communities by neighborhood groups because of the greater diversity of interests and ideas that would foster dialog and discussion on governing issues that extend beyond simply deciding levels of services to be provided. Lightbody contends that a larger city facilitates a vital role for the neighborhood in that it commands more attention beyond the city than a small municipality and thus more attention will be paid to local neighborhood voices.

Moreover, participation in small governments does not guarantee that the decisions will be in the public’s best interest. Not all participation has equal weight or influence. Particular special interests can wield substantial influence over public policy making, especially in smaller governments. Madison foresaw this problem when he argued for a stronger national government to replace the Articles of Confederation. He argued that a strong central government was needed because small decentralized governments could not effectively preserve the freedoms of the people due to their tendency to be controlled by well-organized interest groups that would push a selfish agenda, not the public’s agenda (Diamond 1993; Quinn 1997). While interest groups are active at all levels of government, it appears that special interests have a particular ability to dominate at the local level in smaller, homogenous communities because there are fewer competing interests to balance and check each other.

In summary, there is enough contrary evidence to question the argument that centralization reduces local democratic governance. Geographical size itself is not the determinant of whether a system of government fosters or inhibits citizen participation and involvement. If people are sufficiently concerned with a public policy issue, they will become involved whether the government is large or small. Residents have more incentive to become active in the political process if the elected officials make a decision that is perceived to be contrary to their interests. Obviously, if people feel that their contributions are meaningless or they encounter barriers to participation, only the most determined will spend the resources and take the time necessary to participate.

### **Citizen Participation and Public Apathy**

Many observers contend that it is not the government scale that determines the extent of involvement. There is evidence that the public is apathetic about involvement in local governance. For example, recent studies on civic participation reveal that people are less engaged

in their local communities today than in the past (Putnam 2000; Blanchard & Matthews 2006). Putnam posits that dual-earner households, suburban sprawl, television, and long commuting times have contributed to the decline in civic participation. Blanchard and Matthews found from their study of business concentration that it was not the size of communities that impacted participation but the size of the small business community. They found that communities with many small businesses exhibit greater citizen participation than communities with a concentration of a few large businesses. This was particularly the case with retail establishments. As big box stores replaced small retail and service establishments, the independent, middle-class of local owners eroded. This appeared to coincide with the reduction of civic spirit. According to Blanchard and Matthews, this reduction in civic participation included such measures as voting in local elections, engaging in protests and petitions, involvement in special interest and civil rights groups, and knowledge of local politics and events. Blanchard and Matthews posit that as the big box retailers drive out smaller businesses, a more homogenous, concentrated economy is the result. Because there are fewer competing interests, there is less competition for resources and less policy interest in community governance. Without the controversy resulting from competing interests, the public becomes apathetic and less interested in community governance.

Some argue that e-government has replaced direct citizen involvement and that participation in local governance continues to flourish through electronic means. However, there is little evidence that the internet is used in ways that enhance democratic participation. Indeed, at least one study in 12 cities of citizen use of electronic sources to obtain information and contact government officials found that the use of electronic sources was not high and that it might supplant other forms of contact. The major form of involvement was still direct personal contact or involvement through civic agencies. The conclusion of this study was that participation through electronic means was not an important factor in democratic governance (Scichitano, Williamson, and Esposito 2010).

Lack of controversy might be a major reason for public apathy toward local governance. It might also be that the public perceives local government as simply a service-providing entity and is satisfied with the services. Great Britain is an example of the apathy toward local government. Local government in Great Britain is controlled to a great extent by the central government. The central government has restricted the amount of locally raised tax revenue so that the local level has become increasingly dependent on the central government. It exercises fiscal control over the municipalities by restricting the amount of money they can spend and also by scrutinizing the way it is spent. By 2002, the proportion of locally raised revenue stood at just 19 percent compared to 53 percent just 12 years earlier (Wilson 2005). With policies and processes established by another government level, it appeared that the public did not view local government as a place to give input on governance. The public perception seemed to be that delivery of local services was best left to professionals freed from political constraints and that citizen involvement in local level governance was not important as long as services were being provided satisfactorily. Public apathy toward local government in Great Britain reached such a low point by the late 1990s that academics and politicians started debating whether it was important to try to revive local government as a democratic institution or simply recognize it as an entity to pro-

vide services. Voting in local elections reached such an alarmingly low point that observers called it a “crisis in local democracy.” Observers felt that part of the problem for the lack of participation was that local political leaders had very little authority in their municipalities (Armstrong 2000, 19-25; Pratchett 2000, 3).

### **Efficiency and Government Scale**

A major argument of public choice proponents is that a decentralized governance system is more efficient than a centralized system. For purposes of this discussion, I define efficiency from Grandy (2009) as “the least costly means of achieving given ends,” or the “choice of alternatives that produces the largest result for the given application of resources” (1115). Other adjectives used in the public administration literature to define the term are “technical” or “rational” efficiency. Efficient government can also be characterized through Max Weber’s (1947) ideal bureaucratic model as government administered by professional, competent, career employees who are educated and trained in the provision of public services. The concept of efficiency in this perspective is generally meant to be the least costly means of delivery of services required and desired by the community.

Proponents of decentralized government argue that competition among municipalities to attract development keeps the cost of delivering services down and forces efficiencies on municipal delivery systems. They claim that centralization results in larger, more complex and costly bureaucracies, more layers of management, and more opportunities for red tape. In support of the small government efficiency argument, Hawkins and Ihrke (1990) found in their analysis of 30 empirical studies that the fragmented government system either lowers the cost of public services or does not have the effect of increasing expenditures. Eberts and Gronberg (1990) concluded from their study of 218 metropolitan areas that polycentric government systems constrain locally raised taxes. Oakerson (1999) came to a similar conclusion from his study of police services in a nation-wide sample of metropolitan areas. The implication in their studies is that service provision is *the* major purpose for local government. If the local government’s most important function is the provision of services, the professionals delivering the services should be given maximum freedom to provide the services in the most effective and efficient manner possible freed from political constraints. In other words, efficiency becomes the normative value and the less politics involved in service delivery the better.

Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence in communities where research on community values has been conducted that the overriding value is invariably efficiency in delivery of services. The public appears to be less concerned about attempting to influence local governance policy than with the effective and efficient delivery of services. People are also generally not concerned with which government delivers the service. For example, in one study of the Charlotte, North Carolina civic culture, people interviewed indicated that they expected the city to be run like a business. Efficient service delivery was the major value expressed in the interviews. They were less concerned with access (Bacot 2008). In another study in Denmark, the researchers found that the major value and the focus of the elected officials was on efficiency in service delivery. They were less concerned with fostering means of public participation (Zeemering 2008). Copus (2007) claims that the major pur-

pose of British local government is the provision of public services. Langrod argued that local government was basically an administrative system with its main function to provide services. As such, it was not a vital element of democracy. He felt that democratic governance functioned better at a more centralized government level where the issues could be more dispassionately considered and decisions could be made that are more representative of what is best for the whole (McAllister 2004). The findings in these studies is that citizens prefer a business approach to local government.

The early writers on public administration advocated efficiency as the *sine qua non* of bureaucracy (see Goodnow 1900; White 1926; Wilson 1887). They advocated a separation between administration and politics in order to achieve their goal of a professional and efficient bureaucracy. The council manager movement grew out of this effort to separate politics from administration and develop a professional administration. The early public administration orthodoxy viewed democratic institutions and grassroots public participation as complicating factors that had to be tolerated in the quest for efficiency in public administration. For example, Luther Gulick, an early leader in the public administration field, wrote, "There are, for example, highly inefficient arrangements like citizen boards and small local governments which may be necessary in a democracy as educational devices" (quoted in Rosenbloom & McCurdy 2006, 3). Other aspects of public administration orthodoxy are antithetical to public participation including the emphasis on hierarchy and chain of control, and efforts to maintain administrative stability, consistency and control (Yang & Pandey 2011).

The most recent approach in the public administration field is New Public Management. Efficiency is the centerpiece of this approach with its emphasis on performance measurement, entrepreneurial government, and renewed interest in "running government like a business." This is another approach that seeks to minimize politics in local government. If efficiency is the overriding value in local governing systems, the question that should be addressed should not be whether centralized or decentralized government maximizes democratic governance. It should be which governing system is most efficient at delivering services? Then, the question of the impact of centralized governing systems on citizen participation would not be an issue. Even though efficiency in service delivery is an evidently important value, local government democracy remains a cherished concept and issues of citizen involvement will continue to be a part of the debate on centralized and decentralized governing systems.

### **Special Districts and Citizen Participation**

The creation and use of special districts is another way to take local services out of the political realm to increase their efficiency. One of the purposes of special districts is to bring a more professional approach to the function provided by the district and remove it from the politics of the general purpose government. Proponents of a larger, more inclusive local government system argue that special districts are non-responsive and remote from the citizens they serve. They create problems of accountability and confusion to taxpayers resulting in reduced participation (Hamilton 1999; Ross, Levine, & Stedman 1991, 264; Wallis 1993, 130). They further argue that an advantage touted for the use of special districts, their

technical, businesslike approach and their removal from political pressures, actually results in diminished citizen involvement.

Most single purpose districts are based on highly technical, complex functions and require highly technical and skilled employees. Organizations dominated by highly trained people, such as engineers, scientists, and statisticians with highly technical, complex functions exhibit a technical bias and tend to be insulated from public input and political control. The issues are framed in scientific or engineering language that inhibit public discussion and involvement (Bollens 1997, 112-115). In addition, services professionally and satisfactorily provided, lead inexorably to less citizen interest and participation in policy regarding those services and a greater willingness to rely on professional administration. This was evident in a study of governance of a school district in Texas. The researchers concluded that efficiency values and professional actions were the major determinant on outputs and outcome measures. The elected board was not irrelevant, but board members generally deferred to the career professionals on school district policy so their political control and oversight was minimal (Meier and O'Toole 2006).

As services become more fragmented among independent or semi-independent agencies, local governance becomes more confusing and hence more difficult for citizens to become involved. There is also evidence that government fragmented into special districts, rather than increasing opportunity for citizen involvement, reduces it. The governing bodies of special districts tend to be appointed rather than elected, which removes them from direct accountability to the public. Members of appointed boards may regard their first allegiance to the elected official who appointed them. The appointment process also often obfuscates the responsibility to any one political appointing body because the appointment power is often shared among a number of governing bodies. Even if boards are elected, the technical nature of most special districts mitigates against effective political oversight. Moreover, elected boards generally do not generate voter interest because of the specialized nature of most special districts. The appointment process and the narrow function of the district are designed to reduce political interference in the organization.

Most special purpose districts provide maintenance-type functions, which normally do not illicit a lot of citizen participation. If citizens are satisfied with the provision of a service, such as sewer, water, or transportation services, the service provider becomes almost invisible, and citizens have little desire or need to interact with governing bodies or the administrators of these services. This results in extremely low public interest and low public visibility for board members. Even votes on financial matters in special-purpose districts, other than school districts, generally receive little interest. In one election in a utility district in Texas to approve a \$2.5 million bond and increase taxes to retire the bond, the proposition authorizing the district to issue the bond and levy the taxes to pay the interest and principal was unanimously approved by the four people who voted (Burns 1994, 12).

### **Community Attachment and Fragmented Government**

Proponents of decentralized governing systems argue that residents in smaller communities have a stronger attachment to their communities than those in larger communities and that a more centralized governing system destroys the sense of community. They argue that

strength of the attachment to the community is a factor in participation. For example, Norton Long (1958) argued that metropolitan scale government exists only in the minds of a few planners and social scientists. He felt that most citizens have no identification with the concept of a metropolitan community and are emotionally attached to their local government. However, it could also be argued that the fragmented nature of the decentralized system with its myriad of general purpose governments and special purpose districts results in little or no strong attachment or identification with a particular community. Instead, the general identification is with the larger city, such as Chicago, even though the place of residence is a suburb of the metropolis.

Within the metropolis, because people do not reside, work, shop, worship, attend school, etc. within the boundaries of one municipality, there is no strong attachment with a geographically identified place or to a particular municipality. The attachment is not to the place of residence, but community identity varies according to the interest or particular activity of the individual. Whereas life's activities help to foster civic life and involvement in the community, in a metropolitan area, life's activities are spread over a number of neighboring municipalities and governments. The sense of community varies with the adjective preceding community – for example, religious community, employment community, and school community. Indeed, proponents of a centralized, more geographically inclusive local government argue that a centralized system encompasses more of life's activities and thus fosters a greater sense of community. Fragmented local governing systems not only fragment the sense of community but result in citizen confusion and accountability issues that result in a diffusion of participation (Hamilton 1999; Ross, Levine, & Stedman 1991, 264; Wallis 1993, 130).

### **Centralization, Autonomy and Democracy**

The German sociologist Max Weber (1958) stated that there was a special bonding and sense of community when citizens could be autonomous and exercise power over their governmental affairs. Participation in local government has little meaning if the government has no power to implement its decisions. Autonomy is important in that it provides meaning to local citizenship and community. Citizens know that their debate and discussion of issues can result in government action if the community has independence and autonomy. The French philosopher Alex de Tocqueville (1840) observed that America's thriving local democracy was because of the autonomy and independence of local government from state and federal governments. He claimed that the lack of civic life in France prior to the French Revolution was because local governments had no political autonomy.

These observers were opposed to larger, more centralized governing systems on the grounds that they would reduce citizen feelings of local control and empowerment, which would result in less citizen participation in governance. However, Sociologist Roland Liebert (1976) argues that the autonomy and independence of local governments over the years have eroded. He claims that the history of local government in America has been one of evolutionary movement to more limited autonomy and less self-governing power. There has been a gradual centralization of functions as society urbanized and became more complex. As functions were centralized at the county or state level, the autonomy and the self-governing power of municipalities were reduced.

Stephens and Wikstrom (2002) claim that the state is continuing to restrict local government autonomy and mandate types and level of services to be provided by local governments, and their prognosis is that this erosion of local autonomy will continue. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that larger cities have more autonomy and local control than smaller local governments because they are able to provide services that smaller governments cannot individually provide. They also tend to be able to exert more political influence than smaller individual governments on state legislatures. Examples are the greater use of special districts in the suburbs than in central cities and state legislation that grants special considerations only to central cities.

Given the reduction in local autonomy that already exists, it is reasonable to assume that centralization will have no measurable effect on the amount of local government autonomy. Moreover, too much local autonomy could have negative effects on the public interest and protection of equal rights. As indicated above, a decentralized, autonomous local government system allows more opportunity for governance to be controlled by special interests, which may perpetuate interests that are anathema to the public interest. Many small communities historically have effectively kept out the poor, African Americans, and other unwanted groups through exclusionary zoning, unreasonable building codes, restrictive deed covenants, intimidation, and other official and unofficial policies. Rusk (1993, 34) claimed that polycentric metropolitan areas tended to have greater levels of minority concentration than more centralized areas, a sign of exclusionary policies by individual governments. He identified the highly decentralized Detroit, Cleveland, and Milwaukee metropolitan areas as three of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the country, having segregation indexes of 0.88, 0.85, and 0.83 respectively with 1.00 being complete segregation. Burns (1994) and Darden (1986) have confirmed the essence of Rusk's findings through their own studies. They found that the individual rights of minorities are often trampled upon by small, homogeneous communities with considerable autonomy.

Gray and Jenkins (2000) argue that the purpose of democracy should be to create social stability providing protection for the rights of all members where all are subject to uniform rules and regulations equally applicable to all members of society. They assert that if a purpose of democracy is to lead to a uniform system of governance, then an autonomous local governing system that perpetuates divisions and inequalities does not achieve that purpose. America's experience is that a centralized government has been needed to prevent special interests in smaller governments from abrogating individual democratic rights. America's system of shared authority between levels of government has evolved so that the national level has become the final arbiter and preserver of democracy.<sup>3</sup> For example, federal action was needed to procure the democratic rights of minorities to live in areas that had previously been restricted. This was accomplished by a U. S. Supreme Court decision outlawing enforcement of race-restrictive covenants in 1948 (*Shelley v. Kraemer*) and the passage of the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 stipulating that people could not be denied access to housing on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin.<sup>4</sup>

Fainstein and Hirst (1996, 106-107) also argue that decentralization and local control do not necessarily increase citizen participation and improve governance. They found from their studies of decentralized neighborhood governments in large cities that decentral-

ization did not increase overall citizen participation. Neighborhood control did not appear to empower the poor nor reliably produce participation representative of the community. Neighborhood government was often captured by small groups with particular self-serving agendas resulting in less democratic control. Indeed, many efforts at neighborhood government resulted in disappointing levels of involvement by low income, renter, and minority individuals. Moreover, they concluded that decentralizing governance to the neighborhood level can be divisive to the overall best interests of the neighborhood, city, or region. Fainstein and Hirst found that in some instances enhancing neighborhood power led to racial and income exclusion and not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) conflicts that often blocked the development of necessary facilities. Neighborhood government's potential to promote social equity was further undermined when such efforts pitted one neighborhood against another in competition for public resources. Moreover, neighborhoods with heavy concentrations of poor and minorities would often be the recipients of NIMBY facilities because they were not as well organized and influential in their opposition as the more affluent neighborhoods.

Other studies suggest that the best system of democracy calls for central government constraints on local level authority. A number of large cities decentralized their school systems to the neighborhood level. In New York controversy followed the decentralization. One result was an escalation of patronage and corruption. With the vast reservoir of jobs and money at their disposal, the local school councils became patronage centers of unprecedented proportion. One observer likened them to the heyday of Tammany Hall. One study of the New York school system concluded that a majority of the local school boards ran their districts like fiefdoms where jobs were doled out to campaign workers, lovers, family, or sold for cash (Segal 1997, 142-143).

In Detroit the central school board was thwarted in its attempt at integration by the parochial interests of local neighborhood school boards (Harrigan 1993, 235). The Chicago system decentralized through locally elected school councils with substantial autonomy from the central bureaucracy. Some schools could not find enough people to stand for election to fill the seats. In addition, some school councils mismanaged funds, changed test scores for council members' children, intimidated teachers and principals, and fired school principals for no apparent reason (Lynn & Kowalczyk 1995, 23).<sup>5</sup> The Chicago system improved after the central office reclaimed more control over the local school councils. Decentralization may simply replace one bureaucratic system with another unresponsive, corrupt, political patronage system (Segal 1997, 147).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Considering levels of public participation as one proxy for local government democracy, this paper has shown that centralization does not reduce already anemic levels of participation. In fact, the literature shows that centralized governing systems tend to enhance participation. While studies show that centralized governments might be less efficient than decentralized governments in providing services, the bureaucracy tends to be less politicized in centralized governing systems and services tend to be more evenly provided. Moreover, the experience of neighborhood governance in large cities shows that special interests can capture the reins of government and use them for their own selfish agendas. Regarding com-

munity attachment, it was shown that sense of belonging and identification with the municipality are weak to non-existent in a polycentric metropolitan area with its myriad general purpose and special purpose governments. A more centralized government would increase the sense of belonging, reduce citizen confusion and should result in increased citizen involvement in governance. It was also shown that local government autonomy and local control that have been touted as an essential element of local democracy, have eroded. A centralized government will not further erode local government. Indeed, it might enhance autonomy as more centralized governments have greater resources to meet the needs of their citizens, thus reducing the threat of the state stepping in to make sure a particular function is provided. Finally, too much local autonomy has had negative consequences as the majority has not always protected the democratic rights of the minority.

Given the citizen apathy toward local government, reduction in local government independence and autonomy, and the lack of sense of community among residents, a centralized government system would improve participation or at least not reduce the current participation levels. A more centralized government system might also provide a better mechanism to make governance decisions that are in the best interests of the whole. In addition, it might increase the efficiency of service provision by allowing administrators to focus on service delivery free from micromanagement of elected representatives of small local government political bodies. In any event, the municipality is increasingly being marginalized as an actor in governance as the state governments exercise more and more control and policy issues increasingly transcend municipality boundaries.

The governance focus is thus becoming more regional. For these reasons and, due to their parochial orientation and their inability to reach consensus on regional issues, local governments are becoming less relevant as a forum for democracy. With the major concern among local residents on the efficient delivery of public services, local government is evolving to becoming chiefly a purveyor of services and not a nurturer of democracy. Considering that government scale has been shown to have no negative effects on local level democracy and, in fact, centralization might enhance democracy, the bottom line question should be, what is the most appropriate configuration of government at the local level to maximize the value of efficient and effective delivery of services and make policy decisions that are in the public's best interests?

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Supporters of decentralized government claim that democracy is the opportunity to participate, not the actual act of participation, and therefore participation is not an acceptable proxy for whether democracy is present. However, participation was defined as only one aspect of democracy, albeit an important aspect. Other elements are equal access and protection of equal rights for all. Small homogenous communities often do not provide equal access or protection of equal rights for all. Thus the act of participation is an important indicator of democracy being present.

<sup>2</sup> Copus (2007) claims from his research of the literature that a number of democratic criteria are damaged as the size of a local government unit increases, such as: turnout at local elections, direct citizen contact with elected officials, citizen attendance at council or public meetings, political discussion, citizen perception of influence over local affairs, trust in local government officials, citizen identification with the local community and levels of political engagement.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some observers felt that America's system of government with its system of shared authority among many structures and levels of government was a hindrance to democracy. This was not because it was too centralized but because it was too decentralized (Derthick 1987; Riker 1993). They argued that the federal system allowed the southern states to perpetuate racism after the Civil War well into the twentieth century, which was finally ended by the central government through federal legislation and Supreme Court decisions.

<sup>4</sup> Even though de jure segregation has been banned by national laws and Supreme Court decisions, de facto segregation still exists in many metropolitan areas as Burns, Darden, and Rusk found. This is undoubtedly due to historical settlement patterns, local government policies affecting the cost and availability of housing, and intimidation and unofficial measures taken by local governments and individuals within largely segregated communities.

<sup>5</sup> One assessment of the Chicago decentralization experience concluded that "the job of the principal is probably harder, rather than easier, to perform in a focused, goal oriented way; the leverage of local communities over school operations has not obviously been enhanced in any predictable sense" (Lynn & Kowalczyk 1995, 23).

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