Understanding the Role of Municipal Governance in Stabilizing Inner-Ring Suburbs in St. Louis*

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RESEARCH QUESTION

St. Louis' mature inner-suburban municipalities exhibit a range of economic conditions and racial compositions and serve as valuable living labs for examining social and political institutions impacting these dynamics. To better understand municipal governance effects on economic conditions and racial composition in St. Louis' inner-ring suburbs, I seek to answer the following question: What is the role of municipal governance in achieving and maintaining municipal-level stabilization in inner-ring suburbs?

RATIONALE

Amid substantial changes and perpetual crises in the 1970s, suburbs aimed to strengthen capacity for dealing with emerging challenges. Some cities created new positions and redefined roles for existing ones. Others professionalized for the first time, adopting the council-manager form of government. Officials sought new strategies and techniques, joined professional development groups, and participated in multi-level consortia designed to help build municipal capacity for combating threats to stability. Although some suburbs were not as resource rich as others, each possessed the authority to implement policies and practices designed to help minimize destabilizing effects of negative reactions to racial integration. In each case, municipal governance played a significant role in affecting its city's municipal-level conditions. I examine the impact of decisions on conditions and formulate recommendations for current and future leaders.

Population, segregation, and poverty in the suburbs

The rate of suburban population growth has outpaced urban centers in every decade since the invention of the automobile.[1] Of metropolitan area residents, 60% reside in the suburbs. In terms of size, suburbs have not been "sub" for a long time. And not for a long time have they been synonymous with economic, social, and white exclusivity.[2] Beginning in the 1960s, blacks began migrating to the suburbs. Black suburbanization was often met with white flight, housing discrimination, inequitable policing strategies, polarization, and school district battles.[3] Most suburban municipalities responded by attempting to exclude blacks. Some tried to achieve and manage integration but lacked the expertise needed to effectively address racial tipping. Consequentially, many inner-ring municipalities transitioned from all-white to nearly all-black.

As is true in cities, black families live in the least desirable neighborhoods in mature suburbs, even when they can afford better. Re-segregation, coupled with concentrated poverty, has led to many inner-ring suburban municipalities experiencing significant fiscal stress. Nonwhite neighborhoods, particularly those that have been nonwhite for the longest time, are isolated from economic opportunities. Financial difficulties are often exacerbated by the isolation experienced in neighborhoods located in predominantly nonwhite areas. These challenges compound over time amplifying their effects on individuals, families, and institutions. Local schools destabilize and crime increases as local governments grapple with increased economic woes and struggle to deliver public services.

Some inner-suburban communities managed to prevent racial tipping and economic decline. They enacted policies and implemented racial integration maintenance programs during the early period of black suburbanization (1960s and 1970s). By the 1970s and 1980s, policies and programs were yielding encouraging results. While less overt discriminatory housing practices persisted, some of the formerly all-white areas experienced and maintained a notable mix of black and white residents, and enjoyed a healthy mix of economic strata, housing stock, commercial businesses, and industry. To investigate this phenomenon, I constructed a mixed-methods research model consisting of five case studies. I examine the role municipal officials occupy in municipalities achieving and maintaining municipal level stabilization.

DATA, METHODS, & CASES

I established minimum thresholds to study like cases. Only municipalities maintaining at least a population of 10,000 residents throughout the study period (1970-2015) were considered (except for Maplewood which I included as a control case). Only municipalities demonstrating at least 30 percent black residency at some point during the study period (1970-2015) were considered for the study (again, Maplewood was excluded from this requirement). I was primarily interested in cases in which the municipality shifted from all white to

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[1] Gallagher (2013) notes that while this trend persisted throughout the 20th Century into the first decade of the 2000s, in 2011, that trend reversed for the first time in a hundred years.

[2] See Logan (2014) for more about the dynamic changes in suburbs and the variance in suburban economic classes.

[3] For more about black suburbanization see Galster (1991) and; Schneider and Phelan (1993).

integrated (defined as ≥ 30 percent black residency), and cases in which the municipality tipped or appears to be in danger of tipping to a predominantly black population (71 percent or more).

I gathered and organized a robust data set which included records of councils', boards', and commissions' meetings; budgets; housing and business records; memos and letters; legal documents, including case files and transcripts; legislation, code books, and resolutions; and news articles from historical repositories and electronic sources. I conducted interviews with 30 participants. I analyzed economic strength and stress by examining budgetary activities, such as fiscal structure, fiscal policy and practices, and I compared fiscal conditions with county-wide averages in five-year intervals controlling for population. I partitioned the case studies into three categories: Stable, Declining, and Transitioning.

In the table below, I list the five municipalities selected for the study and summarize some key data trends utilized in the selection process and throughout my examination of the cases.

Summary of changes in racial composition and economic conditions over time (1970 – 2015)

Municipality	Status	Population	% Black	*Per Capita Income	Poverty Rate
Ferguson	Transitioning	28.9k - 21k	0.9 – 67.4	$8k - $20.7	4.1 – 22.1
Hazelwood	Transitioning	14k - 25.7k	1.9 – 34.7	$8.7k - $25k	3.2 – 14.6
Jennings	Declining	19k - 14.8k	0.5 – 91.7	$7k - $15.8k	5.5 – 29.9
Maplewood	Stable	8k – 12.8k	0.2 – 15.2	$7k - $21k	8.8 – 19.6
University City	Stable	46k - 35k	20 – 34.7	$8.6k - $39.7k	6.8 – 17.6

*Denotes 1980-2015 figures.

FINDINGS

While I find municipal governance occupies a predominant role in affecting municipal-level conditions through policymaking, administrative performance, and practices, the most critical determinants of municipal-level stabilization involve a separate and specific set of ancillary factors. I conclude that achieving and maintaining stabilization require officials to possess skills and capabilities to perform duties not mandated in traditional municipal governance. Further, I conclude that professional capacity and voter preferences (in cities with high citizen civic engagement) significantly affect policy decisions, administrative actions, practices, and ancillary factors, thus influencing success and failure of municipal governance in municipal-level stabilization.

In addition to traditional government functions, policymakers and administrators engaged in a range of activities, including leveraging diverse coalitions; advocating at the local, county, state, and federal levels; robust promoting and marketing; garnering multidisciplinary, resident, and business input; and securing and optimizing resources. Municipal governments that anticipated and identified threats early, proactively secured citizen support, mobilized groups, developed and implemented strategies, and overcame volatile political

environments were able to implement stabilization measures with substantive impact. The degree to which local officials successfully executed these maneuvers depended on their level of expertise, professionalism, savoir faire, leadership capacity, and citizen mandates. Government leaders comprised of competent professionals possessing advanced proficiencies in a range of disciplines were better equipped than their nonprofessional counterparts to identify areas of need, utilize existing stabilization tools, and develop new tools.

While most policymakers and administrators favored progressive racial integration policies as best practice, in the civically engaged council-manager cities of Ferguson and University City, policies, administrative actions, and practices tended to reflect citizens' preferences. For Ferguson, this meant decisions often violated best practice, contradicted expressed views of the council majority, and ignored administrative recommendations. Despite a highly charged, civically engaged citizenry, Jennings' strong mayor enjoyed council consensus and minimal threat of voter backlash as power was dispersed among executive, legislative, and administrative offices. For Hazelwood, where civic engagement was relatively low and in Maplewood, where no threat of resegregation ever emerged, municipal leadership enjoyed more liberty to enact policies and practices consistent with the preferences of the council majority and administrative recommendations.

Hazelwood, Jennings, and University City officials proactively enacted anti-discrimination legislation, inclusive programs, civilian boards, and supported community-led stabilization efforts. After becoming charter cities, professionally led Maplewood and Hazelwood experienced an incredible renaissance and exponential growth, respectively. Like pre-charter Hazelwood and Maplewood, Jennings' municipal governance lacked professional capacity and expertise. Serving part-time and requiring no professional training, Jennings' mayor occupied the roles held by city managers and administrative staff in the other cities. This created deficiencies in the ancillary activities critical to stabilization. Consequentially, Jennings failed to stabilize despite early intervention and implementation of best practices. These cities offer fundamental lessons in the role of municipal governance in municipal level stabilization, and how professional capacity and citizen engagement impact the role of municipal governance in municipal level stabilization.

For current and future suburban leaders to stabilize their municipalities they must be willing and able to transcend traditional governance. Policy and administrative choices remain critically important as they are the foundation upon which the house is built. However, the condition of the house and how long it stands are determined by the level and type of maintenance on the house. Public service requires exhaustive effort and difficult, sometimes unpopular, decision-making. While professional capacity expands the toolbox, a city's fate does not rest solely on the presence or absence of professionals. We learn from Ferguson's destabilizing transition that professional governance is only as good as its willingness to leverage best practices despite voter opposition. Jennings' decline teaches us that best practice is ineffective absent the professional capacity

to sufficiently manage, support, and expand efforts. Hazelwood, Maplewood, and University City demonstrate stabilization requires best practice polices, professional capacity, and ancillary maintenance.

APPENDIX 1:

Summary of Findings for Capacity and Voter Status in Five St. Louis Suburbs

Municipality	Status as of 2015	Governance Capacity (Historically)	Voter Status (Historically)
Ferguson	Transitioning	Reactionary/Professional	Exclusionary/High Civic Engagement
Hazelwood	Transitioning	Proactive/Professional	Acquiescent/Low Civic Engagement
Jennings	Declined	Proactive/Nonprofessional	Acquiescent/Reactionary Civic Engagement
Maplewood	Stable	Reactionary/Professional	Polarized/Reactionary Civic Engagement
University City	Stable	Proactive/Professional	Inclusive/High Civic Engagement

Note: Governance capacity and voter status are presented as historical descriptions depicting characteristics exhibited from the point economic decline and/or racial resegregation began to the period when measures were employed. In my Ph.D. Dissertation, I lay out how changes in governance capacity and voter preferences affected different measures, time of implementation, and impact of decisions resulting in municipalities achieving their 2015 status.

Definition of Terms:
Acquiescent- Citizens deferred to municipal leadership on integration measures.
Civic Engagement- Degree of citizen involvement and influence in municipal decisions.
Declined- Municipality is fiscally stressed and resegregated.
Exclusionary- Majority of citizens opposed integration measures.
Inclusive- Majority of citizens preferred integration measures.
Nonprofessional- No city manager, elected executive performs various administrative duties.
Polarized- Citizens were divided on enacting integration measures.
Proactive- Municipal governance anticipated threats and enacted measures early.

Professional- Trained city manager oversees city affairs and supervises administrative forces.

Reactionary (Voter Status)- Citizen civic engagement fluctuated, mobilized for certain issues.

Reactionary (Governance Capacity)- Enacted measures after threats evolved into problems.

Stable- Municipality is fiscally strong and/or integrated.

Transitioning- Municipal conditions trending towards economic decline/growth, racial integration/resegregation.

APPENDIX 2:

Checklist of Policy and Practice Options for Municipal Governance (Municipal Toolbox)

Toolbox:
    Tool

1.) Housing:
    a. Did the municipality employ integration maintenance practices (i.e. point of sale inspections, forbidding For Sale signs, door-to-door solicitations, affirmative marketing to whites?
    b. Did the municipality pass a fair housing ordinance?
    c. Did the municipality rezone land to exclude rental housing?
    d. Did the municipality participate in federal affordable housing programs (i.e. CDBG, Section 8, LIHTC, etc.)?

2.) Policing and Code Enforcement:
    a. Did the municipality have its own police department, or did it contract out?
    b. Did the municipality have programs to specifically recruit black police officers?
    c. Did the municipality have any civilian review boards?
    d. Did the municipality have separate property maintenance and existing building codes?
    e. Did the municipality out-source its code enforcement, share officers with other municipalities, or contract with the county?

3.) Engagement, Support, and Timing:
    a. Did the municipality engage residents, solicit resident input on issues, and include residents in decisions?
    b. Did the municipality appoint and hire black administrators and employees?
    c. Did the municipality establish, support, provide resources, and/or fund civic associations working to improve race relations?
    d. Did the municipality implement strategies of municipal-level stabilization prior to the percentage of Black residents exceeding 20%?

4.) Land Use:
    a. Did the municipality invest significant funds in mixed-use pedestrian friendly developments (i.e. parks, public spaces, recreation centers)?
    b. Did the municipality initiate, support, and/or fund land reutilization, beautification, and revitalization programs?

5.) Fiscal:
    a. Did the municipality develop diverse revenue streams, / employ taxation-by-citation practices relying heavily on traffic fines and court fees to generate revenue?

b. Did the municipality employ a professional CPA or contract with an accounting firm?
c. Did the municipality participate in the county sales tax pool or did it elect to be point-of-sale?
d. Did the municipality apply for and secure grants (for training, equipment, etc.)?
e. Did the municipality use TIF and/or other tax breaks to attract businesses?

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