

Political Support for Regional Government in the 1990s: Growing in the Suburbs?

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Regional government, in its various forms, has long been advocated as a necessary condition for addressing the problems that plague modern urban areas with multiple jurisdictions. Political support for regional approaches has been scant, however, particularly among residents of suburban areas who ostensibly wish to protect the political independence of their suburban municipalities. The authors present the results of a survey of likely voters in a suburban area, Santa Clara County in California, and find widespread support for regional governance. Support for regional approaches was consistent for both general and specific measures and did not vary considerably among demographic subgroups. The authors link this support to the perceived growth of urban problems in the vicinity, such as congestion and pollution.

For decades, scholars and other observers of the urban political scene have lamented the deleterious effects of political fragmentation on the ability of metropolitan areas to solve problems. A wide spectrum of opinions on the issue has formed, ranging from those who believe that urban problems must be addressed by new, region-level governing bodies to

those who maintain that the existing fragmentation is actually preferable to any centralizing reform (Harrigan 1989, 305). After some early successes in creating metropolitan governing bodies, advocates of regional government have found metropolitan reforms difficult to achieve.

Scholars have identified a variety of political factors that contribute to the difficulty of establishing regional governments. Perhaps preeminent among these is the supposed unpopularity of regional government with suburban voters. As Harrigan (1989, 327) noted, "In the typical referendum—on consolidation, the suburban vote is usually against consolidation." A recent study of political support for regional reorganization in suburban regions by Baldassare (1989) confirmed that residents of Orange County, a populous Los Angeles suburban area, were strongly opposed to region-level government. Opposition to government mergers was strong and consistent across demographic categories and political orientations. Fewer than one-third of the survey respondents in Baldassare's study supported regional government, leading to the conclusion

that "public opinion is a serious obstacle to a regional level authority in suburbia" (Baldassare 1989, 468).

Regional Issues in Santa Clara County

The ostensible unpopularity of regional government has a particularly well-defined history in California. Together, the state's fractured local government system (Hamley and Block 1990, 530) and the clout of interest groups have ensured perpetuation of a disjointed, overlapping political environment (Gerston and Christensen 1991, 28-29). Other than acceptance of a few advisory councils of governments, regional governments have not been well-received as policymaking entities. Moreover, most of those now in existence have been given little clout.

The question of regional development in Santa Clara County is examined in this study. Located in northern California, Santa Clara County is one of the state's most populated counties, containing 1.5 million people. Half of the residents of Santa Clara County live in San Jose, California's third-largest city, with most of the remaining population dispersed throughout 13 other incorporated communities. San Jose, however, is primarily a suburban city with vast boundaries and a small central-city area. To this extent, even the core city of the region exhibits key characteristics of suburban sprawl.

In addition to the division of the county into city jurisdictions, even more division is found in the county's numerous agencies and governing boards, many

of which either compete directly or overlap with each other. Among the most glaring examples are two water authorities, four land-use agencies, five public transportation governments, five sanitation districts, five fire-protection districts, fourteen environmental agencies, and thirty-six school districts. Not only do these entities all function within a relatively compact 1,302-square-mile area, but many are also complemented by parallel state and national agencies that provide additional redundancies.

Over the past decade, various problems associated with congestion and the quality of life in Santa Clara County have intensified. The population grew by nearly 25 percent between 1980 and 1990. This increase put phenomenal pressure on housing, transportation, and public service sectors. Moreover, in its wake, the area's new density brought a host of other difficulties, including inadequate supplies of water, increasing traffic congestion, and environmental decay. Yet, with each passing sign of deterioration, underfinanced and limited governments have shown little ability or inclination to surmount these growing problems.

Given the political culture at both state and local levels and the presumed opposition of suburban dwellers, conventional wisdom would suggest little support for regional government in Santa Clara County. Yet, our study found that residents overwhelmingly endorse the concept, placing them at variance with many of their elected officials, with traditions in the state's political environment, and with conventional wisdom espoused by the urban political literature.

Methodology

A telephone survey was conducted to ascertain opinions on regional government from a representative sample of probable voters in Santa Clara County. Probable voters were sought instead of the adult population at large because voters have more opportunity to affect the policymaking process through participation at the polls and interest in influencing others. Assurance of the validity of this subset was determined by a series of screening questions asked prior to administration of the survey.

The survey sample consisted of 411 respondents selected from throughout the county by means of random digit dialing. The questions were asked on March 18, 19, and 20, 1991. To help ensure that the respondents accurately reflected the county as a whole, the sample was stratified by city population and telephone prefix, thereby producing approximately pro-

portionate percentages for each area of the county. The sample has an approximate sampling error of $\pm 5\%$, with a confidence level of 95%. Table 1 compares the age and income levels of the survey sample with those of a recent random exit poll of 985 voters from the same area. Although it is itself a sample, the exit poll was used to predict accurately (within 1 percentage point) several ballot initiatives. The demographic characteristics of the sample thus compare favorably with known parameters of the voting population, lending confidence to the appropriateness of the sample.

Findings

Of the seventeen items in the survey, two questions were designed specifically to gather responses to the general theme of regional government without discussion of political or economic costs. The extent to which responses to these or any

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Sample Compared with Exit Poll Sample

	<i>Regional Government Sample (%)</i>	<i>Exit Poll Sample (%)</i>
Age		
18-30 years	20	20
31-45 years	41	38
46-60 years	24	30
Over 60	15	12
Family Income		
<\$25,000	16	13
\$25-50,000	34	31
\$50-75,000	28	33
>\$75,000	22	23
Gender		
Male	49	49
Female	51	51

Note: For the regional government sample, N=411; for the exit poll sample, N=985.

survey items accurately reflect political support for or opposition to regional government is, of course, debatable. To probe more deeply into such support or opposition, several additional questions also addressed the regional government issue, but in a much more pointed manner. Most of the remaining questions centered on demographic information.

General Support for Regional Cooperation

When asked whether the respondents' city should cooperate with other

cities to solve air pollution, traffic congestion, and affordable-housing problems, more than 90% of those interviewed said yes (see Table 2). Clearly the respondents support the general concept of regional cooperation. A slightly more pointed question asked whether respondents would be more inclined to vote for a candidate for city council, mayor, or county supervisor who supported regional government. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that support for candidates who tout regional government is less overwhelming than support for mere cooperation, but it is nonetheless substantial.

Table 2: Cooperation between Cities

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Undecided (%)	N
Overall	91.2	2.4	6.3	411
Residence				
Live in San Jose	91.9	2.7	5.4	226
Other cities	90.7	2.2	7.1	185
Income				
<\$25,000	83.3	6.7	10.0	60
\$25-50,000	93.5	1.0	5.7	123
\$50-75,000	96.8	1.1	2.1	94
\$75-100,000	97.9	0.0	2.1	47
>\$100,000	90.9	6.1	3.0	33
Age				
18-30 years	93.9	2.4	3.7	82
31-45 years	93.3	3.0	3.7	164
46-60 years	91.6	1.1	7.4	95
60+ years	83.6	3.3	13.1	61
Gender				
Female	91.8	2.6	5.7	194
Male	91.3	2.4	6.3	206
Length of Commute				
0-5 miles	87.5	3.1	9.4	194
>5 miles	93.6	2.0	4.4	206

Note: Subjects were responding to the question "Local governments sometimes have problems dealing with air pollution, traffic congestion, and affordable housing by themselves. Should your city cooperate with others to solve these problems?"

Table 3: Attitude toward Pro-Regional Government Candidates

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Undecided (%)	N
Overall	65.9	14.8	19.2	411
Residence				
Live in San Jose	65.9	16.4	17.7	226
Other cities	66.0	13.0	21.1	185
Income				
<\$25,000	70.0	11.7	18.3	60
\$25-50,000	61.0	19.5	19.5	123
\$50-75,000	75.5	11.7	12.8	94
\$75-100,000	70.2	12.8	17.0	47
>\$100,000	75.8	15.2	9.1	33
Age				
18-30 years	61.0	15.9	23.2	82
31-45 years	63.4	17.1	19.5	164
46-60 years	75.8	11.6	12.6	95
60+ years	68.9	14.8	16.4	61
Gender				
Female	58.8	13.9	27.3	194
Male	73.3	15.5	11.2	206
Length of Commute				
0-5 miles	67.5	16.3	16.3	194
>5 miles	64.9	13.9	21.1	206

Note: Subjects were responding to the question "Would you be more inclined to vote for a candidate for city council, mayor, or county supervisor who supported regional government?"

Support for Specific Measures

Many political values often garner sweeping public endorsements in the abstract, only to lose considerable support when discussed in a specific context (see, e.g., Prothro and Grigg 1960, 286). Thus, although the concept of regional government in Santa Clara County received one-sided public approval in a theoretical sense, the question remained how respondents would react in a circumstance that approached application. Although support for regionalism in the narrower sense showed some slippage, several more specific regional propositions still

captured one-sided majority approval. Tables 4, 5, and 6 reveal responses to specific and more demanding questions about yielding political independence, regional agency veto power, and merging regional planning agencies.

The only proposition that came close to being unfavored by a majority of respondents was the idea of merging separate planning agencies into one with more authority. Perhaps the prospect of regional government as *bigger* government is the dissuading factor here. Nonetheless, a majority of respondents did support the notion.

Table 4: Trading Political Independence for Regional Cooperation

	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>	<i>Undecided (%)</i>	<i>N</i>
Overall	57.9	23.1	19.0	411
Residence				
Live in San Jose	57.1	23.5	19.5	226
Other cities	58.9	22.7	18.4	185
Income				
<\$25,000	45.0	21.7	33.3	60
\$25-50,000	54.5	26.0	19.5	123
\$50-75,000	67.0	19.2	13.8	94
\$75-100,000	68.1	19.2	12.8	47
>\$100,000	78.8	18.2	3.0	33
Age				
18-30 years	61.0	22.0	17.1	82
31-45 years	59.2	23.8	17.1	164
46-60 years	66.3	19.0	14.7	95
60+ years	36.1	31.2	32.8	61
Gender				
Female	51.0	22.2	26.8	194
Male	65.0	24.8	10.2	206
Length of Commute				
0-5 miles	59.4	25.1	15.5	194
>5 miles	65.0	24.8	10.2	206

Note: Subjects were responding to the question "Should your city give up some political independence in exchange for regional cooperation?"

Demographic Nuances

The survey on regionalism in Santa Clara County revealed surprisingly widespread, across-the-board support, with few differences in terms of gender, income levels, area of residence, or length of commute to the workplace. Nevertheless, some intriguing nuances emerged from respondents in simple cross tabulations. With respect to age, younger people were more supportive of the concept of sharing taxes than were older people—a not entirely surprising revelation given that younger people tend to earn less money and, thus, have less investment. However,

in contrast to other age groups, younger people were also the most willing to yield political independence in exchange for regional cooperation.

A more striking and less easily explained outcome in support lies in the difference between male and female respondents. In every instance, women were less likely to support regional government. Female respondents were not more likely to *oppose* regional government; rather, they were less likely to be decided on the issue.

Baldassare's (1989) study of attitudes toward regional government suggested that opposition was centered in suburban

Table 5: Regional Agency Veto Power

	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>	<i>Undecided (%)</i>	<i>N</i>
Overall	56.2	27.3	16.6	411
Residence				
Live in San Jose	56.8	29.2	14.0	226
Other cities	55.8	25.7	18.6	185
Income				
<\$25,000	50.0	31.7	18.3	60
\$25-50,000	52.0	34.2	13.8	123
\$50-75,000	66.0	16.0	18.1	94
\$75-100,000	55.3	25.5	19.2	47
>\$100,000	54.6	39.4	6.1	33
Age				
18-30 years	56.1	30.5	13.4	82
31-45 years	59.2	26.2	14.6	164
46-60 years	56.8	26.3	16.8	95
60+ years	47.5	26.2	26.2	61
Gender				
Female	54.6	22.7	22.7	194
Male	58.7	31.1	10.2	206
Length of Commute				
0-5 miles	51.3	28.1	20.6	194
>5 miles	59.4	26.7	13.9	206

Note: Subjects were responding to the question "Suppose that a nearby city may allow a large office complex which, if built, would greatly increase the traffic into your community. Should a regional agency have veto power over the decisionmaking process?"

areas. Yet our study indicates that residents of the central city of the county, San Jose, are consistently equally likely to support regional government. This suggests that one key to affinity for regional solutions is exposure to the spatial dimensions of policy problems. Driving on congested highways in smoggy air may help transform opinions about the wisdom of metropolitan governing bodies.

Multivariate Analysis

To disentangle potentially misleading relationships in the bivariate analyses,

each of the survey items was included as a dichotomous, or divided, dependent variable in a separate maximum-likelihood legit model with the five independent variables (age, income, gender, length of commute, and residence in San Jose). We do not provide the results of these analyses here, but they uniformly demonstrate that although the direction of the relationships tested is consistent with the bivariate analyses, the independent variables are *not* statistically significant ($p < .05$) when related to measures of support for regional government.

Table 6: Merger of Several Agencies into One

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Undecided (%)	N
Overall	51.8	29.0	19.2	411
Residence				
Live in San Jose	51.4	29.2	19.5	226
Other cities	52.2	28.8	19.3	185
Income				
<\$25,000	56.7	18.3	25.0	60
\$25-50,000	48.8	35.8	15.5	123
\$50-75,000	50.0	29.8	20.2	94
\$75-100,000	70.2	19.2	10.6	47
>\$100,000	57.6	27.3	15.2	33
Age				
18-30 years	56.1	30.5	13.4	82
31-45 years	59.2	26.2	14.6	164
46-60 years	56.8	26.3	16.8	95
60+ years	47.5	26.2	26.2	61
Gender				
Female	46.9	26.3	24.4	194
Male	56.3	30.7	15.9	206
Length of Commute				
0-5 miles	49.4	26.3	24.4	194
>5 miles	53.4	30.7	15.9	206

Note: Subjects were responding to the question "The nine-county Bay Area now has separate planning agencies for air quality, transportation, and open space. Should these agencies be merged into one and given more authority?"


Public Opinion Supports Regional Government in Santa Clara County

Elected officials in Santa Clara County function in environments similar to their coworkers elsewhere—they are chosen by specific constituencies to serve them and their corresponding geographical areas. As such, the officials' responsibilities normally extend as far as the borders of their communities, leaving little opportunity for them to deal with issues or problems that may concern the larger domain. However, although jurisdictions remain intact "on paper," reality

suggests that pressing issues concerning the quality of life in a region will permeate city limits.

Increasingly, "megapolitan" urban societies suffer area-wide problems that transcend parochial jurisdictions, rendering solutions to these predicaments almost impossible to achieve. With government boundaries and modern political problems increasingly not confluent, leaders and citizens alike must devise new schemes to overcome old jurisdictional lines.

Regional government offers a governmental response mechanism to pressing contemporary problems that have emerged

with the trappings of modern urban settings. Although such alternative forms have not been well received in the past, the impact of the environmental, social, and economic issues of the 1990s may suggest the need for a scholarly reassessment. In Santa Clara County, public opinion seems ready for such an enterprise. The question remains, however, whether elected officials are up to the challenge. Additionally, where urban problems have not yet met a perceived threshold of dissatisfaction, regional government may remain as unpopular as ever. A recent proposal to unify local governments in the Sacramento area failed, largely because of lack of support in suburban localities. However, the problems associated with suburban sprawl are less completely evolved in the Sacramento area, which itself has absorbed some of the outgrowth of the San Francisco Bay Area. 

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