Institutional Change:
When Will Communities Make Attempts to Alter Local Government Structures?

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Abstract

We investigate conditions that promote institutional change in local U.S. governments. Specifically, we argue that shifts in community populations and citizen access to tools of direct democracy facilitate institutional changes in city government structure at the local level, as does the level of professionalization within a political system. We develop specific hypotheses about efforts to alter local governing institutions and offer initial tests using data from the 1996 International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Form of Government survey. We find that while changes in population and access to tools direct democracy have an additive effect promoting attempts to change local governments, they may be more appropriately cast as having an interactive effect, with each moderating the influence of the other on institutional change.

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When will institutions change?

Once they are established, we might expect institutions to change little if at all. Plausible answers to the question, “when will institutions change?” include “not very often” or, even, “hardly at all.” Some institutional structures are hard to change because they require supermajorities to introduce changes. Institutions are also often sticky because would-be reformers do not readily agree on alternatives to the status quo. British politicians, for example, continue to debate reforming the House of Lords. While most agree that an un-elected hereditary upper house is an anachronism, few can agree on the alternative: Appointed or elected? If appointed, by whom? And if elected, what kind of franchise or electoral system should be used?

Similarly, Australians continue to discuss a shift to a republican form of government: A large majority of Australians seem willing to remove the queen as head of state, but they are divided on whether a president should be elected and powerful, elected and powerless or chosen by the legislature. There may, then, be disagreements over alternatives, disagreements made worse by uncertainties inherent in predicting many institutional effects (Andrews and Jackman, forthcoming). Without a clear alternative with known effects, extant structures persist.[1]

But there are potential motors for changing institutions. One source of change is exogenous: a change in the population of a community may well produce a demand for changing the political institutions of that community. This may not always be the case if, for example, shifts in population do not shift the distribution of policy preferences (Tiebout, 1956). Sources of change endogenous to any political setting should largely be due to the reactions of political losers to a given status quo. For example, Riker suggested losers are an important motor for change in any political setting since they are often a source of alternative proposals. Losers are also more likely to *support* institutional changes than winners (Riker, 1982 and also Anderson et al., N.d.; Bowler, Donovan and Karp, 2002). But even in considering the importance of losers, there is reason to think institutions may be relatively stable. If there is changeover in power within the context of a set of fixed institutions, then former losers – now winners – may well see the benefits of the institutions they now run and so forget their previous commitment to change. Furthermore, more or less by definition, 'outsiders' tend to have relatively little say in the power structure of a community: The winners are not going to change because a few losers ask them to. Still, if there is going to be a source of demands for change, a systematic source of these demands will be losers.

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[1] Some institutionalized conventions, such as a specific set of standardized weights and measures (North, 1990), are particularly stable because of the efficiencies they produce (Tsebelis, 1990), lowering transaction costs and solving coordination problems. Consequently, there is little incentive for anyone to work change them. This is one reason, perhaps, why the metric system has been introduced with such little success in the U.S.

Local Government Form and Reform in the U.S.

As the electorate in local and national U.S. politics expanded and shifted throughout the 19th century, local political communities changed substantially – from being composed of mostly the well-to-do propertied class, to including substantial numbers of wage laborers and recent immigrants. This is the kind of influx of prior losers that could potentially affect institutional change. In fact, the governing structures of local communities changed substantially as these populations grew and changed. A number of scholars have explored the development of local government institutions (e.g., Hays, 1964; Welch and Bledsoe, 1988). But as more people were drawn into the U.S. electorate by the expansion of political opportunities for American men during the Jacksonian era (Bridges, 1984; Keyssar, 2000), communities adapted their local institutions and the developed new types of political organizations, such as mass political parties and machines (Aldrich, 1995; Erie, 1988; Riordan, 1963).

Machine politics, however, violated the sensibilities of many Americans (Steffens, 1985) as well as appeared to provide an institutional weapon by which one set of political actors could mobilize support on its behalf in new, threatening ways. In other words, the political machine eroded the long-time political hegemony of certain elites. The subsequent “reform” movement might be seen as an effort to restructure the political arena and curb mass-based, local political movements, which depended on the capacity of the machine to deliver material benefits to supporters. The reformers, notwithstanding the civic pieties that might have inspired them, also sought to restructure local institutions, so that the values of professionals prevailed and so that the unsavory political involvement of residents who were not as yet Americanized was minimized and corrupt behavior was allegedly eliminated. The re-shaping of local political institutions reflects not simply efforts to perfect governance and maximize public welfare (Banfield and Wilson, 1966), but also the struggle for political advantage (DiGaetano, 1988).

There is, nonetheless, general agreement that the set of local political reforms that displaced older local government forms were propelled by reactions to perceived excesses of the political machine. Specific reforms such as the city manager form of government, at-large elections, civil service, nonpartisan elections, and timing local elections so that they occur at different periods than state or national election – all part of the reform package – were reactions to machine politics. Specific reform institutions emerged directly from five major principles pursued by reformers (Ross and Levine 2001:159):

1. The public interest should be served (rather than the parochial interests of neighborhoods, ethnic/racial/religious identities, organized political parties, or special economic interests)
2. The most competent, best trained people should run a city’s affairs (rather than one’s partisan cronies or supporters)
3. Politics and sound administration are separate enterprises and the latter should be insulated from the former
4. Most local matters are technical in nature; there is no partisan criterion for delivering efficient and well-crafted services such as public safety, education, waste management, or street maintenance
5. Scientific management and professional administration should be the dominant concern for local government

The general thrust of these principles was to insulate policy making and administration from politics. The desire to elevate some ethereal notion of public interest to the fore justifies institutions that reduce incentives to consider special, rather than city-wide interests. Nonpartisanship and at-large elections clearly are viewed as institutional commitments to elevating the public interest above others. Asserting the importance of training and competence as more important than partisan loyalty, of course, implies that the spoils system needs to be jettisoned, to be replaced by a merit-civil service system.

The prevailing ethos of the earlier period of Jacksonian democracy was that administering public services could (indeed should) be the province of "the common man". With the emergence of the modern city, however, public health, civil engineering, professional policing, and public education, among other policy areas, meant that trained, credentialed professionals should be delivering services, rather than the denizens of the party-in-power. Since city and urban services, moreover, were viewed as primarily administrative, anything that could be done to insulate service delivery from politics was to be incorporated in the institutional design of local governments. These techniques included having an unelected professional serve as a city's chief administrator, removing the council completely from any direct role in administration, separating local elections from partisan state and national elections, placing all municipal agencies and departments under the authority of the city manager, and designating the city manager position by a highly educated professional.

The apparent anti-democratic nature of focusing local authority in the hands of a putatively public-spirited and professional class was not of great concern to reformers of local politics, because reformers did not see local matters as matters of contending principle. Rather, local policy was to be designed and delivered on the framework of economy and efficiency. If there was an ideology, it was rooted in the Weberian expectations that antiseptic administration and policymaking could be separated neatly from the messier world of politics.

The argument that to the extent that reform institutions – nonpartisanship, at-large elections, city manager forms of government, and heavy use of civil service – have centralized local politics and increased the cost of access for citizens is linked directly to the claim that local government reformism is class biased. Because the reform movement was seen as spearheaded by upper class professionals, often anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic in their outlook, others began to claim that the primary purpose of reform was not to improve local service delivery as it was to reduce the influence of the hoi-polloi. However, these claims are less important than what the evidence is regarding public access in more or less “reformed” local environments.

Nearly forty years ago, Lineberry and Fowler (1967) argued that the more reformed a city was, the less likely it was to reflect the socio-economic profile of the community in its taxing and spending. Lascher (1991) empirically confirmed, in his analysis of local nonpartisan elections in California, that the absence of the partisan label produces a disproportionate increase in actual Republican representation at the local level. In any case, there is a substantial body of literature that suggests the structural reforms that were introduced by local reform had the effect of narrowing the local political base, reducing turnout among working class and minority groups, reducing the influence of groups that are segregated by neighborhood, and made local officials less responsive to particular groups. As a consequence, the more reformed a local government’s institutions are, the fewer Latinos or Blacks are likely to be on the city council and the less likely it is that communities will reflect their policy preferences (Bezdek, Billeaux, and Huerta, 2000; Bullock and MacManus, 1990; Zax, 1990). The more reformed communities are, the more likely the city officials are to overcome opposition and objection from spatially concentrated groups.

Indeed there has been a fairly extensive literature dealing with the claim – and some litigation – that arises from the feeling that reformed cities are designed to dilute the power of particular racial and ethnic groups.

It is therefore unsurprising that as communities grow from being rather homogeneous to having larger and more complex populations, pressures increase to reform the reforms. One might expect that as communities grow, they become more diverse. Often this is reflected in substantial growth in local rancor and controversy and demands for shifts from at-large to district forms of electing council members (or some combination of at-large and district level) or even shifts to reduce the independence of city managers or to increase the number of city council members.

Of course, the initiative, referendum, and recall were also often introduced as part of the reform package. In a sense, these conflict with the general tendency to shield officials and policy making from direct access by the public. By placing administration in the hands of an unelected professional manager, providing civil service protection to public employees, and reducing neighborhood influence via at-large elections, one might expect the cost of public access to rise and for non-elected officials to feel less vulnerable to direct political pressure. The initiative, referendum, and recall provide citizens with opportunities to affect public policy and institutions directly. In that sense, they comprise a departure from the otherwise more insular nature of reformist institutions at the local level.

Expectations about Institutional Change in Local U.S. Politics

Institutions do not, of course, change themselves, but obviously require human actors to promote, defend, and succeed at altering them. The argument we outlined above suggested that losers will be the source of attempts to change any electoral system but that they may also find it an uphill struggle to change institutions. More seriously, it is difficult to develop a model predicting which losers are likely to make proposals. To do that would likely require the kind of detailed case study pursued by Riker. Rather than try to predict when and where losers will become mobilized to change institutions we assume that ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ (losers who want to change the system) are always out there – somewhere – and begin to think about the settings in which institutional entrepreneurs are more likely to be present and at least attempt to alter political institutions.

Some of these settings are likely to be influenced by exogenous factors, including for example, large population shifts. Importantly, we think aspects of the existing political structure may present better opportunities for those who wish to change the system to make, and succeed, in proposals for reform, than others. Here we outline such opportunities. Our main expectation is that institutional entrepreneurs will be more likely to try altering governing institutions when they have access to tools of direct democracy – particularly the initiative. However, we also elaborate other expectations about institutional and social correlates of institutional change at the local level.

Instruments of direct democracy allow outsiders the opportunity to at least propose institutional and policy changes even while elected officials oppose them. The motivations for any specific reform may, of course, vary widely. Some reformers may be ‘good government’ types who wish to introduce changes in order to produce generally better government. Others may be special interest mischief-makers manipulating the initiative process along the lines, perhaps, suggested by David Broder (2000). Either way, the initiative allows ‘outsiders’ to set the institutional agenda and make it more likely that changes are proposed in institutional structure. On the state level, beyond public policy proposals, initiative movements have attempted – and in many places succeeded – in altering the rules of governing institutions by promoting term limits and primary reform (Tolbert, 1998, 2003). The initiative allows reformers to mobilize popular disaffection from the institutions of government, and allows voters to voice that disaffection. The initiative, then, may operate as intended in giving 'outsiders' a chance to bring the 'insiders' to heel (Bowler, Donovan, and Karp, 2002).

A second way in which systems may be open is the extent to which a political system is professionalized. With professional politicians, we may expect to see the entrenchment of politicians with little or no interest in changing the political system. The more professionalized the system, the fewer the opportunities for entrepreneurs to introduce change. One reason for the lower opportunities may be that professional politicians may make fewer mistakes than amateur ones. If politics is a learned skill, then those who are more fully involved for longer periods of time are likely, everything else being equal, to have better skills than those who have much more part-time or intermittent engagement. That is, institutional change may come about because the 'winners' essentially make mistakes: Professional politicians would not allow change (and especially not if the effects are uncertain or unclear), and so would work to defeat change.

But this 'losers drive change' argument may not be the only explanation for institutional change. Attempts to open a system may well be generated by 'outsiders' and losers but, as we noted, the people in the best position to change things are the winners and they are not likely to want to commit political suicide. Changes in rules, then, may well reflect attempts by winners to remain winners, or at least not lose so badly. This is a large part of Boix's (1999) account for changes in electoral systems to proportionality and it is also seen Ware's (2002) look at the evolution of U.S. electoral laws. Consequently, and to the extent that losing does not provide an explanation for changes, we might expect to see more institutional change where politicians are more skilled. A different interpretation of the sources of institutional change, then, gives contrasting expectations on the effect of professionalism.

Third, we might expect to see change associated with turnover in the system. Turnover at both the elite and mass levels should help promote change; conversely, where there is little turnover we are not likely to see much change. Some political systems may, for example, have a lower level of incumbent advantage than others. Some electoral systems, too, allow for greater turnover. In the U.S., for example, it is known that at large electoral systems shape the representation of ethnic minorities.

> The logic of single member districts is that they permit minorities who are spatially compact to elect a member to a board with a much smaller percentage of the overall population. Smaller electoral jurisdictions also lower the resource cost of running for election and winning. Interpersonal contact becomes important in smaller jurisdictions, and that contact can substitute for more expensive media-based campaigns. Both arguments imply that minorities will be at less of a disadvantage in single-member-district systems (Meier: 2002: 5; see also Matland and Studlar, forthcoming)

Here we argue that opinion minorities, too, may well find at large systems harder to crack and change.

Related to this kind of turnover at the level of political elites is the importance of change in the underlying population. Population shifts will likely bring with them shifts in underlying distribution of preferences: the current political system may not serve the interests of the changed population and 'institutional entrepreneurs' can use these changes to introduce institutional changes. True, this is not necessarily the case: some shifts in population may conceivably buttress the position of the status quo but population changes are likely to bring about a change in the position of the median voter and so introduce demands for change. Social change of this kind, for example, forms an important part of Knight's account of how informal rules change (Knight, 1992:173-188)

In the following empirical section, then, we investigate three hypotheses:

H_1 : The presence of direct democracy, and in particular the initiative process, will be positively associated with institutional change.

H_2: More amateur-oriented political systems will be more open to institutional change than professionalized governments.

H_3 : The greater the change in composition of a political system (either among elected politicians or among the underlying population), the more institutional change will take place

We will also investigate hypotheses 1 and 3 with an eye to the potential interdependence of institutional opportunity and specifically the change in the composition of a population. Specifically, we will test the hypothesis that we should observe much more change in governing institutions when population shifts occur in places that provide access to the initiative than in places with population shifts and no opportunity to propose popular initiatives. Consequently we will examine both models with main effects testing hypothesis 1 and 3 as well as specifications testing the effect of the interaction of initiative access and population change on attempts to change institutions. These models are discussed and presented below.

Data and Measurement

For people interested in institutions, state and local politics in the U.S. have an enormous appeal. There are literally thousands of cases to be examined – 50 states, 3,000 counties, and thousand more cities and special districts add up to roughly 80,000 political units within the U.S. Furthermore, it is possible to study this range of institutions without having to become entangled in the kinds of discussions over the range and size of cultural differences that often bedevil cross-country comparisons. This, in principle, allows a broader based look at institutional change.
The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) City Form of Government

survey provides the most comprehensive data on institutions and institutional change at the local level (for details of the survey and response rates, see DeSantis and Renner, 2002). The 1996 ICMA FOG survey has a sample size of approximately 4,500 communities.

Descriptive data for the 1996 survey are presented in Tables 1 and 2, which display a list of the kinds of changes considered by the survey.[2] Approximately one in eight communities experience attempts at changing some aspect of their institutional structure with approximately half of these attempts succeeding. Absent any precise theoretical guidelines, it is not possible to say whether this is a big number or not. But there does seem quite a lot more change going on that discussions of institutional stability might lead one to expect. Furthermore, communities move to and fro in their choices of decision-making structures. Table 2 shows the flows in changing patterns of form of government. While we may be able to talk about trends in institutional changes, such as a general tendency of communities to move from a mayor-council government to a council-manager system over a long period of time (DeSantis and Renner: 2002: 97), the flow observed here does not appear to move in a single direction over these short periods.[3]

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

In order to investigate the hypotheses identified above, we develop several measures of attempts at institutional change. We are interested in the total number of changes in city government form proposed, as well as a simpler question whether changes were proposed at all. The ICMA FOG survey is a rich source of information about proposed and enacted institutional change at the local level. We use three dependent variables measuring proposed institutional change. As noted in Table 1, the questionnaire includes a battery of 10 items assessing whether particular changes in city government were proposed and whether each of these proposals were approved.[4] We are interested in whether or not any of these 10 potential changes were proposed – a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not any attempt was made between 1991 and 1996 to alter local government in any of the ways specified on the survey. We are also interested in the local-level count of these proposed changes, effectively asking how many of the 10 were attempted. In addition, we use a measure of self-reported change efforts. The ICMA questionnaire also includes an item asking respondents, "…how many attempts have been made to change your municipality's *structure or form of government* (i.e., a change from at-large to ward or district elections, elimination or addition of position of CAO, etc.)?"[5]

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[2] Data from the 1991 survey show similar patterns and so the patterns in Tables 1 and 2 are not out of the ordinary

[3] We do not have data on communities over time and so cannot show cycling of preferences over institutions in the Rikerian sense. What these flow data do show, however, is that there is flipping back and forth suggesting that it is possible for some communities to cycle in their choice of institutions over a period of time.

Access to the initiative process is perhaps easiest to measure (1 = the locality has the initiative process; 0 = the locality does not);[6] and the relevant hypothesis is easy to state: access to the initiative should promote, and thus be positively related to, attempts at institutional change. More complicated is the measure attributes of local political systems. Local political systems come in a great variety: some have full time elected officials, others part-time; some are term-limited, others are not; some have partisan elections, others do not. We created a measure of how amateur or professional local politics are by summing a series of conditions: whether elections were non-partisan, whether council meetings where held once a month (or less often), whether councilors and mayors were term-limited, and whether their posts were part-time rather than full-time. The more points on this scale, the more amateurish the political system and, hence, the more likely we are to see institutional instability.

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[4] These include each of the potential changes listed in Table 1.

[5] The italics and example are included in the phrasing of the question on the survey. These self-reported instances of change are modestly correlated with the count we compute (r=.68, p<.001)

[6] But see Bowler and Donovan (2004) on the difference between having the process in principle and actually in use.

We attempt to assess our third hypothesis using several indicators of stability in the local political system. We include the level of retention for elections to the city council: the higher the retention rate of city council members (the more incumbents remain undefeated as a share of the number of council members up for election last time), then we expect to see much less change since the composition of the council will remain unchanged. We also expect to see at-large systems of elections (here measured as the number of seats elected at large as a percentage of the total number of seats) to dampen the number of reform attempts.

In all the models, we include as a control the size of the local population (in thousands) but were able to local more elaborate demographic data only for bigger cities (over 20,000 in population). Below, we report results for models estimated using the full ICMA data set and no indicators for changes in population size, racial composition, or economic conditions. Then we present models that include this more detailed population information as well as social and economic indicators, but with a smaller number of cases. This data set with more variables but fewer cases includes a Census Bureau indicator for community-level change in total population between 1980 and 1990.[7] As population changes, we should expect to see changes in institutional structure. So we anticipate a main effect for population change, but anticipate the possibility that population change interacts with institutional opportunities to promote structural changes in government. That is, we should see an interaction between preferences and institutions. We expect to see more efforts to alter governing structures in response to population changes where existing institutions provide these changing populations with greater, direct access to the political process, particularly access to the popular initiative.

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[7] We also note that we use a natural log transformation of shift in population, 1980-1990. We anticipate relatively smaller shifts in populations, for example moving from a churning of 50 to 60 percent of the population, will have a stronger effect on institutional change than shifts at the high-end of the observed range (e.g., the difference between 240 and 250 percent growth).

We also include controls for the racial composition of city councils and – in larger cities where data was available – their underlying populations. Diversity may well be associated with greater change than homogeneity; especially, given the history of many U.S. cities, racial homogeneity. For this reason we include measures of the diversity of the council (percent white). For cities where it is available (again, those with populations greater than 20,000) we also include demographic data on ethnic composition (percent white).

Results

Table 3 displays results from three models looking at the different measures of attempted institutional change from the 1996 Form of Government survey.[8] The variable modeled in column 1 is our attempted change/no attempted change dichotomous indicator. Consequently, this model is specified as a probit. The other two columns – reported change attempts and a number of changes computed from survey responses – both reports models of count data estimated using Poisson regression (King, 1986).

[Table 3 about here]

We can make a number of points on the basis of these results. In general, we find some support for several of the hypotheses. The initiative process does help promote attempts to change the political system. Across the three different measures and specifications, the presence of the initiative for citizens is a significant correlate of effort to change local institutional forms. Both political professionalism and having at-large council elections dampen turnover. We also find here that places with larger populations (and likely a larger total number of political losers), tend to see more institutional instability than places with smaller, presumably more homogenous, places.

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[8] We estimated similar models using 1991 data and obtained strikingly similar results (not shown here).

With an eye toward addressing the substantive significance of these estimated parameters, there are some indications that the effects are meaningful. We estimate the changes in predicted probabilities of seeing any attempt at institutional change (the probit model in the first column) for these indicators in Table 4. In the first column of probability changes, we see that the presence of the initiative (minimum value = 0, maximum = 1) increases by 0.035 the probability that a community saw an effort to alter its governmental structure between 1991 and 1996. Given that only 12.5 percent of communities saw efforts to change their form of government during the early 1990s, this 0.035 change in probability, equivalent to a shift of 3.5 percent of communities seeing reform/change efforts, is a relatively large impact on the population of cities investigating government change.

[Table 4 about here]

In reading Table 4, note that the effect of population size is a bit misleading. For example, as we examine the effect of the population indicator moving from its observed minimum (the 93 good people of Angel Fire Village, NM) to the ICMA sample maximum, Los Angeles with just under 1 million residents reported in the 1996 dataset, we see an increase of .438 in the probability a community will see a government change effort. Both the minimum and maximum observed values are somewhat outlying, so the more modest effect characterized in the second column is a bit more realistic and reliable way to assess the effect of population size on institutional change efforts across all cities in the ICMA sample. This second column estimates the effect of a one standard deviation in each variable, including population size (from ½ s.d.

below the mean to ½ s.d. above) which increases the probability of proposed local government change by 0.013.

We can elaborate upon these models by taking a preliminary look at the effects of underlying demographic patterns, at least for the larger cities where data was available. We investigate the hypotheses that population shifts (not just the overall size of the population) affects efforts to change local institutions and that population shift interact with the availability of the initiative as an avenue for institutional change. Table 5 shows the results for the larger cites since we can include measures for population change as well as the underlying diversity of the population (percent white) and a measure of economic well being (unemployment). Again, each of the three dependent variables are included in the analysis. However the table is complicated by the presence of alternative specifications modeling the interactive effect of population change and the availability of the initiative. This represent the argument that population changes will have even more of an effect if institutions allow expression of these differences in preferences.

[Table 5 about here]

As we observed in Table 3, the presence of the initiative encourages efforts to change local government. However, it is only in the count of change attempts models (columns 5 and 6), that this relationship reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. Several other variables again are directly related to change efforts, but change in population does not appear to be one of them. In none of the independent effects models (columns 1, 3, and 5) do population shifts significantly affect efforts to change government. However, we have speculated that the presence of the initiative, as well as other avenues of government openness we leave for further research, serves as a potential switch: That it is only in the presence of institutional avenues for changing government structures that the population shifts affect efforts to make these changes.

In order to test the interactive hypothesis about initiative and population shift, we estimate the models in columns 2, 4, and 6, which include the relevant interaction. We find that in large cities, the availability of the initiative allows changing populations to try to change their governing structures. In both the probit model of change/no change attempted, as well as the count of change efforts computed from the ICMA survey, we see a positive, statistically significant relationship between the interactive term and efforts to alter governments. The interaction coefficient in column 4 is not flagged, but it is worth noting that the t-statistic for this interaction is 1.309 (thus, p<.1 on a one-tailed test).

[Table 6 about here]

Again, we interpret the substance of the probit model estimates in Table 6. Specifically, we model changes in predicted probabilities associated with each covariate using the estimated parameters reported in column 2. The main probability change estimates of interest to us here involve the substantive interpretation of the relationship between the interaction of population change and initiative availability and efforts. These probability changes were computed using Clarify (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King, 2003), allowing us to characterize not only the substantive change in predicted probability of a change movement, but also the statistical significance of that probability change. Importantly, we see that shifts in population in cities with popular initiative affect significant changes in the probability of an effort to change government structure, while population shifts in communities with no initiative see no significant change in the probability that an entrepreneur will attempt to alter their government. The movement from minimum to maximum population shift, producing a 0.257 change in the predicted probability of a change campaign in communities with initiatives, likely overstates the effect of population shift in initiative communities, given the fact that the minimum and maximum (here Maywood, CA, with a .1 change in population, and Gilbert, AZ, with population growth over 250 percent) are outliers just that total population size range was bound by extreme cases. So, again, it makes more sense to consider the standard-deviation change in predicted probabilities, computed in column 2. We find that in initiative communities, there is a .047 greater probability in seeing government change efforts as populations changing a standard deviation across the mean, while the effect of population change in communities without the initiative is negatively signed, smaller, and not significantly different from 0, suggesting minimal effects for population shifts in cities without a direct avenue for relatively new residents to affect policy or institutional design.

Discussion

At its narrowest, these results are suggest that some political settings are more open to institutional change than others. Whether that is a good or bad thing depends in part on whether one sees change as an example of "reform," or responsiveness to changes to electorates, or of "instability," and rent seeking by powerful interests seeking to lock in political advantage.

More broadly, these results do point up that there are some limitations in how we measure institutions and institutional change. Despite the fact that "institutions matter" is now a commonly heard mantra, we still know relatively little about measuring institutions and we can see this by considering some of the limitations of this project. This paper has not considered any direction to change. Rather there has just been a discussion of change *per se*. But some changes may be seen to open up a political system, others narrow it down and there may be different explanations that generate the two types of changes we are not picking up here. Nor have we made any particularly subtle distinctions among types of rules; treating all on the list as equivalent and meaningful rather than treating some as large, others as small. Nor have we made any attempt to examine the impact of combinations or sets of institutions. All of these are clearly shortcomings of the current study.[9]

But these limitations are in some ways general limitations in the understanding of institutions and not (simply) a reflection of weaknesses in the current study. There is, for example, no established dimension (or set of dimensions) of institutional change equivalent to the left/right scale that we can adopt as a dependent variable. Moreover, even though bundles or combinations of institutions may have a distinct effect, it is not clear how, *a priori*, we should bundle institutions together. One 'natural' grouping, for example, might be between the initiative and at-large elections since they were introduced as part of the same reform package. Yet, as we saw in the empirical work, these institutions pull against each other in affecting further institutional change. Thus, some bundles may cancel each other out, others reinforce each other, but we do not yet know how to categorize institutions in a way to explore this argument.[10]

While there are quite elaborate and explicit theoretical expectations about what institutions do (or do not do), there are much less explicit guidelines about how to measure institutions in a general sense. Perhaps there cannot be. Perhaps the context of institutions and institutional change requires more nuanced kinds of explanations that take us back to context dependent studies and individual settings. But for the time being, some of the (many) limitations in this study suggest there are limitations in how we define institutions and that there is more work to be done.

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[9] Nor is it an exhaustive list.

[10] And in many ways these concerns speak past other efforts to characterize and organize institutional forms for empirical analysis (Ostrom, 1986).

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Table 1. Attempts at Changing Rules in U.S. Cities, 1996

	Attempts	Successful attempts	
		N	As % of attempts
Change *from* at-large *to* ward or district elections	140	74	53
Change to a mixed system with some at-large and some ward or district elections	56	34	61
Change *the mix* between the number of council members elected at large and the number elected by or district	30	14	46
Increase the number of members of the council or board	78	46	59
Decrease the number of members of the council or board	51	30	58
Change the method of election of the chief elected official	55	33	60
Add the position of CAO	163	127	78
Eliminate the position of CAO	65	24	37
Change who appoints the CAO	12	4	33
Change in form of government	216	106	49
Total	866	492	57
Total municipalities in sample	4,552		
Number of municipalities experiencing one attempt at change or more	571 (12.5%)		

Source: 1996 ICMA Form of Government survey

Table 2. Flow of Changes in Form of Government, 1996

	Mayor-council	*Council-manager*	*Commission*	*Town meeting*	*Representative town meeting*	*Total*
Mayor-council	0	106	6	0	1	113
Council-manager	58	0	5	4	1	68
Commission	7	9	0	0	0	16
Town meeting	3	9	0	0	0	12
Representative town meeting	3	1	1	0	0	5
Total	71	125	12	4	2	214

Source: 1996 ICMA Form of Government survey

Table 3. Predicting Change in City Institutions, 1996

	Any change attempted (Probit)	*Reported attempts to change government* (Poisson)	*Number of change attempts, Table 1* (Poisson)
Initiative	0.170** (0.055)	0.385** (0.088)	0.506*** (0.077)
Amateur politics	0.037* (0.017)	0.062* (0.025)	0.046* (0.022)
At-large elections	-0.264*** (0.060)	-0.472*** (0.097)	-0.500*** (0.085)
Stability (Low turnover)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)
Total population	0.001** (0.000)	0.001* (0.001)	0.002** (0.000)
Percent white	-0.139 (0.093)	-0.297* (0.142)	-0.189 (0.129)
Constant	-0.891*** (0.144)	-1.614*** (0.230)	-1.418*** (0.204)
Observations	3,894	3,894	3,894
$\chi^2_{(6\ d.f.)}$	57.72***	69.35***	120.79***
pseudo R^2	0.02	0.02	0.03

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

Table 4. Predicted Probabilities[a] of Any Attempted Change in Government (Probit Model in Column 1, Table 3)

	Shift from minimum to maximum value	*Shifting from ½ s.d. below mean to ½ s.d. above mean*
Initiative	0.0345	0.0164
Amateur politics	0.0727	0.0109
At-large elections	-0.0551	-0.0225
Low turnover	-0.0356	-0.0076
Population	0.4377	0.0126
Percent white	-0.0291	-0.0076

[a] The predicted probabilities for changes in each variable were assessed using post-estimation commands for Stata described by Long and Freese (2001).

Table 5. Predicting Attempted Change in Large U.S. Cities (Population>20,000), 1996

	Any change attempted (Probit)	*Any change attempted* (Probit)	*Reported attempts to change government* (Poisson)	*Reported attempts to change government* (Poisson)	*Total number of changes attempted* (Poisson)	*Total number of changes attempted* (Poisson)
Initiative	0.169 (0.130)	-0.304 (0.257)	0.082 (0.194)	-0.316 (0.363)	0.435** (0.158)	-0.532+ (0.299)
Amateur politics	0.042 (0.031)	0.043 (0.031)	0.051 (0.044)	0.053 (0.044)	0.039 (0.034)	0.042 (0.034)
At large elections	-0.369* (0.150)	-0.370* (0.151)	-0.638** (0.227)	-0.640** (0.227)	-0.575** (0.176)	-0.580** (0.176)
Stability (Low turnover)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.000 (0.003)
Population	0.001* (0.001)	0.001* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.001* (0.001)	0.001* (0.001)
Percent white, council	0.027 (0.265)	-0.020 (0.267)	-0.430 (0.353)	-0.484 (0.354)	-0.123 (0.298)	-0.230 (0.298)
Population change	0.043 (0.053)	-0.077 (0.076)	-0.032 (0.078)	-0.136 (0.108)	0.085 (0.064)	-0.195* (0.092)
Percent white, population	0.005 (0.004)	0.006 (0.004)	0.018** (0.007)	0.018** (0.007)	0.014** (0.005)	0.015** (0.005)
Unemployment	0.052* (0.026)	0.048+ (0.026)	0.092** (0.034)	0.088** (0.034)	0.047 (0.030)	0.039 (0.031)
Initiative* Population change		0.224* (0.104)		0.199 (0.152)		0.465** (0.123)
Constant	-1.728** (0.484)	-1.471** (0.499)	-2.785** (0.727)	-2.571** (0.740)	-2.591** (0.593)	-2.043** (0.601)
Observations	625	625	625	625	625	625
$\chi^2_{/\text{d.f.}}$	$20.49^{*}_{9\text{ d.f.}}$	$25.08^{**}_{10\text{ d.f.}}$	$20.49^{**}_{9\text{ d.f.}}$	$26.90^{**}_{10\text{ d.f.}}$	$37.86^{***}_{9\text{ d.f.}}$	$51.52^{**}_{10\text{ d.f.}}$
pseudo R^2	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

Table 6 Predicted Probabilities[a] of Any Attempted Change in Government, Large U.S. Cities (Probit Model Column 2, Table 5)

	Shift from minimum to maximum value	*Shifting from ½ s.d. below mean to ½ s.d. above mean*
Amateur politics	0.1001	0.0198
At-large elections	-0.0897	-0.0369
Low turnover	-0.0186	-0.0049
Population	0.4295	0.0271
Percent white, council	-0.0047	-0.0013
Percent White, population	0.1049	0.0239
Percent unemployment	0.3778	0.0274
Interaction		
Initiative*Population change	0.2577*	0.0458**
No Initiative*Population change	-0.1044	-0.0145

**p<.05, *p<.1

[a] The main effects of each variable were assessed using post-estimation commands for Stata described by Long and Freese (2001). The interactions, however, were interpreted using *Clarify* for Stata (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King, 2003).