INSTITUTIONALIZED DIFFERENCES IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

A comparison of city managers, mayors and council members in Texas

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Introduction

This chapter examines to what extent economic development perceptions are associated with particular institutional city offices. The answer to this question has relevance for the success of city economic development efforts. Successful economic development efforts are those that increase revenue and/or jobs, among other benefits, and are often dependent upon a united leadership in the local government concerned. A united leadership, in turn, can depend upon the ability to build coalitions in support of economic development initiatives. Economic development activities require commitment of finite city resources, and city leaders may be held accountable by members of an attentive public for poor economic conditions. Coalition building on economic development proposals, therefore, may be instrumental in ensuring not only passage of a given initiative but its success as well. To the extent that economic development perceptions may have some basis in institutional position, resulting in institutionally based differences in attitude between city leaders, coalition building may be a particular challenge.

Our present study employed data from a single state in the United States. We used survey results from city leaders in the state of Texas to determine the extent to which perspectives on economic development differ across three distinct city institutional office-holders – city managers, mayors and council members.

City economic development in the United States

Economic growth is a primary responsibility of city leadership in the United States. A wealth of literature indicates that local economic development policy has been and continues to be a major activity for city leaders (see Kerstein 1993; Rigos and Paulson 1996; Leo, Beavis, Carver and Turner 1998; Ross and Levine 2001; Reese 2006; Reese and Sands 2007; Betz, Partridge, Kraybill and Lobao 2012). We can note several significant reasons for the key role which economic development plays for city leaders. First, the constitutional place of cities in the United States’ federal system limits cities’ ability to regulate the greater economic environment. Unlike
federal or state governments, cities cannot regulate commerce or population movement in and out of their borders (Peterson 1981). Cities can regulate land use, and city leaders, therefore, focus on this single economic growth tool. Through land use policy, cities can determine how land will be developed to increase economic vitality. A second reason city leaders in the United States focus heavily on economic development relates to how cities view developers as ‘growth machines’ (Molotch 1976, 1988). Developers stand to profit financially from physical development, and this helps ensure that land use policy will move in a specific direction—in the direction of large construction projects, which it is hoped may ultimately benefit the city.

A third reason for an emphasis on economic development projects by city leaders in the United States is similar to the growth machine phenomenon but relates specifically to elected city leaders. There are electoral benefits from development for elected office-holders such as mayors and council members (Feiock and Kim 2001; Feiock, Park, Steinacker and Kim 2005). Elected city leaders can take credit for economic development projects, particularly projects that yield physical structures, as a means of demonstrating positive job performance to their constituents. Development, particularly physical development, produces jobs from the outset.

City leaders in the United States typically pursue supply-side strategies that focus on attracting business by reducing the cost of doing business. These strategies include tax abatements, land clearance, the use of public money to provide infrastructure for private development, an emphasis on downtown business interests, and similar policies with a direct connection to job creation, city revenue generation, and the preferences of local business (see e.g. Grant 1990; Bachelor 1994; Rigos and Paulson 1996; Reese and Rosenfeld 2002; Reese 2006; Reese and Sands 2007; Morgan 2010). While there has been some movement in recent years away from this traditional supply-side approach towards considering more heavily the provision of amenities, such as the arts, as an integral component of economic development strategy (see e.g. Strom 2002; Clark 2011; Vanderleeuw and Sides 2016), city leaders in the United States generally continue to rely on traditional strategies to ensure economic growth and prosperity. A continued reliance on a traditional economic development strategy, with its emphasis on physical construction, benefits the interests of both developers and elected city leaders.

Is there convergence or divergence in economic development perception among institutional city office-holders?

Leadership convergence on economic development issues

An argument can be made that city leaders will tend to be in agreement, or convergence, about the economic choices that need to be made for their city, regardless of their institutional position. In his seminal work, City Limits, Paul Peterson (1981) argued that given the placement of cities in the United States’ federal system—denied the ability to regulate commerce and the flow of people in and out of their borders—city leaders have little choice but to engage in growth activities that involve land use. Economic growth, therefore, becomes an overriding and unifying challenge for city leaders—a ‘unitary interest’.

Several additional factors contribute to a convergence in orientation toward economic development decision making. First, despite differences in job duties, within a given city each institutional office-holder operates in a common context based on a larger cultural milieu (see Reese and Rosenfeld 2002 for a discussion of the relationship between economic development and culture). For example, the orientation toward governance in Texas (the state from which our data were drawn) can be characterized as small government and pro-business. The State Constitution of 1876 reflects skepticism of government and restricts authority by, among other
things, limiting the governor’s power to formulate the state’s budget, which is determined by
the Legislative Budget Board composed of state legislators; and by providing for the popular
election of top executives. This restricted government authority is accompanied by a business-
friendly environment. In 2014, for example, Chief Executive ranked Texas as the top state for
business, based on a survey of CEOs. This was the tenth consecutive year that Texas was
recognized in this manner.

Municipal government in Texas replicates the state’s system of restricted government author-
ity and pro-business environment. Mayoral power tends to be limited, with city mayors being of
the weak-mayor type – with Houston’s use of a strong-mayor system an exception. In keeping
with the state’s minimal government and pro-business orientation, Texas cities typically have
a city manager with a small four- to seven-member part-time council and part-time mayor.
This cultural milieu provides the context within which economic development perceptions are
molded and decisions made.

In addition, institutional city office-holders experience a push toward convergence in their
thinking about economic development because of their service to a common public. Certainly,
there can be wide differences in policy preferences among members of the public. Nevertheless,
certain communities can attract like-minded individuals or people of a similar socioeconomic
standing who share policy preferences. For instance, there is evidence that suburbanites may
be more ideologically conservative compared to non-suburbanites and therefore more apt to
oppose increased taxes for some types of services (Kruse 2005). Institutional office-holders in
the same city, therefore, can be subject to the preferences of a common public, either the direct
public pressure experienced by elected leaders or indirect public pressure experienced by those
in appointed positions.

Most clearly, elected city leaders have an incentive to claim to be acting in the best economic
interests of a citizenry, for example, by promoting activities whereby local government uses its
resources to stimulate private development, such as land acquisition and clearance, to promote
business interests (to borrow from a point made by Feiock, Park, Steinacker and Kim 2005).
However, as Teske and Schneider (1994) argue, appointed leaders such as city managers are
not immune from the concerns of citizens. While not overtly engaged in partisan politics, city
managers often interact with citizens and citizen groups to explain, if not defend, city policy
and to inform the city council regarding citizens attitudes. Further, institutional city position-
holders communicate among one another and among a broader set of political, economic, and
civic elites. To borrow from Robert Michels (1966), communication across elites tends to
foster a shared set of values. This communication may promote a shared vision of what, from
a developmental perspective, is in the best interest of the city. In effect, shared interests among
city leaders may develop for a number of reasons.

Leadership divergence on economic development issues

However, an argument can be made that a common viewpoint among institutional city office-
holders regarding economic development is not something that will necessarily occur.

One argument that runs directly counter to Peterson’s unitary interest thesis is that local poli-
tics is too politically divisive to allow for the consistent emergence of agree around issues, even
the issue of economic growth (see e.g. Stone and Sanders 1987). A very similar argument can
be derived from literature that points to severe community divisions over policy that amount to
culture wars (Sharp 1999). Cultural divisions – that show up, for example, in political conflict
over city policy to provide addicts with needles to dampen the spread of AIDS – can polarize a
city’s population and leadership. This perspective is consistent with Pfeffer and Salancik’s (2003)
argument that external constituencies influence the behavior of organizational members beyond what the organization prescribes. When city residents speak with divergent voices, the behavior of those in positions of institutional authority may similarly diverge.

Further, it can be argued that the institutional characteristics associated with the leadership positions under investigation will influence how office-holders view their city’s economic development needs. This argument, that the unique characteristics of a city office will influence the office-holder’s economic development perspective, is what we investigate in this chapter.

In essence, institutional differences may overpower any influence that drives those in leadership positions to adopt similar viewpoints. For instance, it can be argued that elected position-holders, such as city council members, are ‘constituency oriented’ (see Svara 1990). This is because their position depends on maintaining an acceptable level of voter approval. Conversely, an appointed position-holder such as a city manager, while not fully insulated from public opinion, is most directly responsible to the appointing body and, as such, may hold a longer-view on city policy compared to elected leaders. While both elected and appointed position-holders may ultimately be accountable to a common citizenry, institutional differences structure how susceptible office-holders may be to public sentiment. Here we refer to models of representation that Pitkin (1967) labels the ‘delegate’ and ‘trustee’ models. Publicly elected leaders are most proximate to the citizenry and can be expected to act as delegates by according weight to the immediate and specific concerns of their particular constituency. Retaining elected position can depend upon giving such weight. By comparison, appointed office-holders are less proximate to (though not fully insulated from) the citizenry and therefore have greater flexibility to act as trustees for the public interest; they have a greater ability to make decisions without considering public opinion at every turn. As trustees, appointed leaders can rely relatively less on the immediate dictates of the mass citizenry and relatively more on their own training, experience, and judgment.

In addition, because of the duties of their office, appointed position-holders, such as city managers, tend to have high levels of training, experience and education. In their study of Texas city managers, for example, Vanderleeuw, Sides and Williams (2015) reported that the majority of surveyed managers held a Master’s degree or above, with most of those in the field of Public Administration. Further, office-holders such as city managers and, depending upon the city, mayors are distinct from city council members because managers and mayors in strong-mayor cities possess an executive function. City councils, by contrast, view issues more from a legislative perspective. Therefore, the institutional duties and responsibilities of offices might be expected to influence perspectives on economic development, as might responsibilities to stake-holders (for example whether the office-holder is responsible to voters or to governmental bodies) and differences in training and education.

The study

According to urban regime theory, a city leadership cohort is composed of a broad spectrum of governmental, business, nonprofit, and community organization actors (see e.g. Stone 1989; May and Jochim 2012). While the particular city leadership mix can vary from city to city and over time, successful local economic development efforts increasingly have come to involve collaboration among a wide set of intra- and inter-community governmental and non-governmental participants (Accordino and Fasulo 2011). While the specific leadership mix of participants can vary depending on the city, the major political institutions of city government in the United States are relatively constant. These common institutional leadership positions are city mayor, council member and city manager.
City government structure in the United States tends to provide for a city council, a mayor and in most cities a city manager. Some cities in the United States use a mayor-council form of government, where formal, institutional power rests with an elected mayor and city council. A strong-mayor form of government may see the mayor have power to veto council ordinances and appoint heads of city departments. In a weak mayor form of government the mayor presides at council meetings but the institutional powers of that office differ little from those of the council as a whole.

A further institutional position across many cities in the United States is that of city manager. Council-manager cities employ a city manager to oversee the day-to-day operations of city government. A city council hires a manager who reports and advises the council. The use of professionally trained, full-time city managers is common. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) estimates that the council-manager form of government is in fact the most common form of city government in the United States, used by 59% of cities in 2011.

The use of a city manager, however, does not preclude a city from also having a mayor. Council-manager systems will still tend to include the position of mayor, though in these cases the mayor will have reduced responsibilities compared to the strong-mayor system. City councils, of course, can be found across various forms of city government, mayor–council or council-manager.

Our study examined the perceptions of these three city institutional office-holders – city mayors, managers and council members – on a series of economic development-related issues. Prior research points to the influential role in city economic development efforts played by holders of these positions (see e.g. Svara 1987; Zemmering 2008; McCabe, Feiock, Clingermayer and Stream 2009). Our analysis focused on identifying systematic, patterned differences in viewpoint between these three institutional office-holders. To do so, we mailed surveys to city leaders in the state of Texas: to city managers in 2011, mayors in 2012, and council members in 2013.

Surveys were sent to leaders in home-rule cities in Texas with a population of greater than 5,000. There were 319 home-rule cities that had a manager in 2011, according to the Texas Municipal League Online Directory, and this was the list used for the subsequent surveys. The surveys yielded responses from 151 city managers, 136 mayors, and 54 council members. These survey results, of course, measured attitudes and opinions rather than actual decisions. However, given communication skills and experience with community issues as well as prior decision-making regarding community affairs that all three of these institutional office-holders typically engage in, it is reasonable to expect a level of correspondence between the attitudes and opinions of these leaders and their actual decisions.

Our data were drawn one state, Texas. The state is large and diverse, and, despite historic images, is a populous, urban state. With a population of 26 Million is the second most populous state in the United States, and 84.7% of the state’s population resides in urban areas, a figure above the national rate of 80.7% (according to the 2010 census). The state includes some of the largest cities in the United States. These include the cities of Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio.

We investigated economic development perceptions across four dimensions, each of which is posited to influence the type of economic development proposal a given office-holder will likely support. First, we examined the perceived importance of economic development to the city. The importance accorded to economic development will influence the level of urgency that drives city leaders to deal with economic development and adopt economic development proposals. The lower the importance given to economic
Institutionalized differences

development by a city leader, the lower that leader’s motivation to support any given economic development initiative. Second, we looked at perceived economic challenges facing the city. How a city’s economic challenges are viewed will influence the preference for particular economic development strategies. For example, if lack of jobs is considered to be the major economic problem, tax abatements and city land clearing efforts might suffice to attract retail businesses that would provide jobs but at a pay that might be lower than would be desired if the lack of high paying jobs was considered the main problem. Third, we examined city leaders’ ideas about resource limitations. How resource limitations are perceived also may influence strategy. The view that the city lacks financial resources necessary to pursue development, for example, may lead officials to oppose initiatives or support inexpensive projects. Fourth, we examined the importance of obtaining support from various others, such as local businesses and citizen groups. The importance accorded support from citizen groups, for instance, may influence a given office-holder to support development proposals that promote quality of life amenities rather than one that provides tax abatements for business without consideration of amenities. The survey questions are listed in the Appendix at end of this chapter.

Perceptions on these four issues – the importance of economic development, economic challenges facing the city, resource limitations, and support from others – are fundamental in shaping the kinds of economic development proposals city leaders are likely to support. For example, if economic development is not considered important to the city, it is unlikely support would be given to any specific proposal. Or, if a lack of high paying jobs is perceived to be the major challenge facing the city, then a proposal to attract a big-box retail store via tax abatements may not receive ready support. As a further example, if support from citizens is considered important, then a proposal to include a quality of life amenity, such as a park, as part of an economic development package may be viewed favorably.

The findings

Importance of economic development

The level of importance accorded economic development was strikingly similar across all three institutional positions. For city managers, mayors and council members, the mean score was 6.6 (out of 7). Despite differences in institutional position, these three types of city leaders considered economic development efforts equally important to their city. There was no reliable institutional difference on this question.

Economic challenges facing the city

Findings on the economic challenges facing their city, reported in Table 7.1, revealed an overall convergence of viewpoint within which there were some notable differences. For comparative purposes, the six items are ordered by importance to city managers. As can be seen, all items were considered an economic challenge; over one-quarter of all respondents identified each item as a challenge. The findings also showed a general consistency in how these challenges are prioritized. Lack of revenue, rising costs, and lack of high paying jobs ranked as the top three challenges for each institutional position-holder.

However, while city managers viewed lack of sufficient revenue as the overriding financial challenge facing their city, mayors and council members viewed rising costs as the more serious
financial challenge, though by a plurality and not a majority. A test of means showed the views of city managers to be reliably different from those of the elected officials on this item (significant at the 0.05 level for both – manager v. mayor, \( p = 0.001 \); manager v. council, \( p = 0.018 \)), while the views of mayors and council members were not reliable different. City managers viewed lack of sufficient city revenue as a greater economic challenge than did mayors or council members. Regarding rising costs, though not reliably different from council members on this item, a test of means showed the views of city managers to be reliable different from those of mayors at the 0.05 level (manager v. mayor, \( p = 0.021 \)). City managers viewed rising costs to be less of an economic problem than do mayors. In all, there were reliable differences between these institutional office-holders regarding city financial challenges related to lack of sufficient revenue and rising costs. Beyond these two items, means tests revealed no reliable difference between the three city office-holders regarding any economic challenge facing the city.

### Resource limitations

As was the case with perceptions of economic challenges facing their city, when asked about resource limitations, institutional position-holders exhibited a general convergence of viewpoint punctuated by some divergence. Descriptive findings presented in Table 7.2, ordered by the frequency of responses from city managers, revealed a general consensus that the cost of funding associated with development was the single largest resource challenge, the lack of collaborative partners and city image posed greater limitations than did other listed resources, and the lack of support within city government and other problems with greater priority were not considered resource limitations to the respondent’s office. One notable difference was how council members viewed costs associated with development. Council members were reliably less likely than mayors to perceive funding costs associated with development initiatives as a resource challenge compared to mayors (council v. mayor, \( p = 0.039 \)). A second notable difference was that, compared to city managers and mayors, council members were nearly twice as likely to view lack of economic development expertise among employees as a resource challenge faced by their office (at the 0.10 level – council v. manager \( p = 0.094 \); council v. mayor, \( p = 0.091 \)). Aside from these differences, the three types of office-holders held very similar views on city resource limitations.
### Institutionalized differences

#### Table 7.2 Challenges to your office’s efforts to attract development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage who identified:</th>
<th>Managers (n = 151)</th>
<th>Mayors (n = 136)</th>
<th>Council members (n = 54)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding costs associated with development initiatives</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of partners to collaborative with on projects</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City’s image</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of staff committed to development</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of expertise in economic development among employees</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to communicate with potential new businesses</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of political commitment to attracting more development</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support within city government for development initiatives</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other problems have priority among employees</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
Values are the number of responses to a given item expressed as a percentage of returned surveys from a particular city position.
Items are ordered according to city manager responses.
Statistically reliable differences are in bold font.

#### Importance of support from others

Successful economic development efforts can depend upon broad-based community support. As Table 7.3 reports, city managers, mayors, and council members were in agreement about the level of importance of support from fellow city leaders and citizens in the adoption and implementation of economic development proposals. Each of these institutional city office-holders viewed support from other city leaders as important for an economic development proposal to be adopted and implemented by their city. Support from citizens and citizen groups was considered important, but somewhat less so, and might be labeled as fairly important.

#### Table 7.3 Importance of support from city leaders, business and citizens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean score for:</th>
<th>Managers (n = 151)</th>
<th>Mayors (n = 136)</th>
<th>Council members (n = 54)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City leaders</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens &amp; citizen groups</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td><strong>5.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
Responses were on a 7 point scale with 1=Unimportant and 7=Important.
Statistically reliable differences are in bold font.
Support from business was also considered less important than support from other city leaders. Regarding business support, however, there was a reliable difference between institutional office-holders. Although there was no reliable difference between city managers and mayors, council members were reliably less likely than their counterparts to view support from business leaders as important (council v. manager, \( p = 0.001 \); council v. mayor, \( p = 0.001 \)). While the city managers and mayors may be interpreted as viewing business support as fairly important in the adoption and implementation of economic development proposals, council members were decidedly less enthusiastic regarding business support.

**Conclusions**

Our study was motivated by the following thinking. If the success of an economic development effort depends upon a general consensus among city leaders regarding strategy and necessary resources, then we need to investigate perceptions on resources and economic challenges facing the city and the extent these viewpoints differ systematically across types of city office-holders. To the extent there are patterned differences in economic development perception between types of city leaders, there will be institutionalized differences in opinion regarding appropriate economic development strategies. Therefore, successful city leadership will be a leadership that is able to build coalitions. Successful coalition building, however, will be facilitated by the ability of leadership to recognize the institutionalized nature of varying viewpoints. To address this issue, the guiding question for our study was: To what extent are economic development perceptions associated with particular institutional city offices?

Our study’s findings are based on a survey of city mayors, managers and council members in the state of Texas. These findings generally support Peterson’s (1981) unitary interest thesis. City leaders in the state of Texas tend to view economic growth as their primary concern. We found a high level of agreement regarding the importance of economic development efforts among city managers, mayors and council members across cities. Regarding perceptions on specific economic development issues, though the findings reveal some level of divergence, for the most part there exists convergence in viewpoint across institutional office-holders and cities. In addition to a high level of congruence in perception regarding the overall importance of economic development efforts, there is general agreement on the economic challenges facing cities, available resources to cities, and the importance of support for specific proposals from various other groups.

The clear implication from our findings is that this level of congruence in perception on economic development issues provides a fundamental context, or starting point, from which coalition building on city economic development proposals can begin. There exists a fundamental perceptual framework that provides the foundation from which specific economic development strategy and policy proposals can be formulated.

Ostensibly, agreement among city leaders becomes easier when there is a broad consensus regarding fundamental orientations and perceptions on an issue, compared to when such consensus is absent. When trying to reach agreement on a specific economic development proposal (for example, land clearance and tax abatements to attract a Walmart) fundamentals in this sense involve perceptions regarding economic challenges facing the city (hypothetically, lack of jobs for city residents, particularly among city youth); fundamentals in this sense also involve ideas about city resources (hypothetically, the city has or can obtain resources to clear land and provide infrastructure to facilitate new retail operations). It is important to note, however, that while our findings support the idea that economic development conversation among those in city leadership positions begins with a general level of consensus regarding fundamentals, coalition building in support of an economic development proposal can still be a challenge. There
are numerous factors, such as career ambition and the personalities of the city leaders involved that potentially can make the process of building consensus on a given proposal difficult. Among these factors are any institutional-related differences on specific economic development issues. Our findings indicate an interrupted convergence in economic development viewpoints among institutional city office-holders. Within the context of a general convergence of attitudes, there are occasional institutional-associated differences.

Managers view lack of city revenue as more important than either mayors or council members and tend to view rising costs as less important than do mayors. The views on city finance held by managers may be due to their distinct training – a higher level of education and a specific educational background in the field of public administration (Vanderleeuw, Sides and Williams 2015). While city managers are distinctive regarding city finance items, council members are distinctive regarding resource limitations and support from business. Council members are less likely than mayors to view funding costs associated with development initiatives as important. Though both council members and mayors are elected officials, the greater hesitancy by council members to view funding costs as an impediment to development may stem from their proximity to citizens who might view development as a good thing. In this sense, council members may view funding more from the perspective of a delegate and reflect the immediate concerns of their constituents more than do mayors. While we cannot say with certainty how many of our council member respondents were elected from, and therefore represented, council districts rather than being elected at-large (because this question was not included in the survey instrument), most council members in Texas are elected to represent a unique district. Therefore, in Svara’s (1990) terms council members are more constituency-oriented than are mayors.

Further, council members are almost twice as likely to view lack of expertise in economic development among employees as a problem, compared to both city managers and mayors. We suspect this difference reflects the lack of engagement with city bureaucracy on the part of council members by comparison to managers and mayors. Finally, council members are less likely than their institutional counterparts to view support from business as important for an economic development proposal to be adopted and implemented. We speculate this difference is again due to greater proximity to citizens: between those who represent the city at-large (city mayors and managers) and those who represent specific districts (as noted above, for the most part council members represent constituents in districts). Business support for an economic development proposal may be important from an at-large perspective in order to provide jobs and revenue for city residents. However, though the city overall may want business activity, any given council district may not contain many businesses, particular if the pattern of business location is to centralize in one area of the city.

Apart from these several differences in economic development perspective, the overall convergence in viewpoint among the three institutional position-holders – regarding the importance of economic development, economic challenges, resource limitations, and support from city leaders and citizens – is intriguing. Why is there such widespread convergence in viewpoints? While we do not have definitive answers at this point, two explanations are worthy of consideration.

One potential explanation for the wide-spread shared orientation toward economic development found in our study has to do with the fact that city leaders operate in a specific cultural milieu. As noted earlier, Reese and Rosenfeld (2002) argue that culture is instrumental in understanding local economic development. City leaders in the present study were drawn from cities in one state, Texas, where a particular value is placed on small government. Therefore, many city office-holders share a similar orientation toward the importance of city economic development, as opposed to relying on the state or federal government for any assistance.
A second potential explanation involves communication between city leaders. The institutional office-holders that we surveyed operate in the context of an economic development network that can produce similarity in outlook. In this context, city managers and mayors tend to communicate more frequently with each other than they communicate with city council members (Jarmon and Vanderleeuw 2011). This more frequent communication between managers and mayors may explain why in most of the cases of divergence between our surveyed city leaders, the office-holders who differed most from the others were city council members.

While similarity in economic development outlook within any given city is potentially the result of a shared culture and communication between leaders, our findings also point to a high level of consistency in outlook among leaders across different cities. What might account for congruence in economic development perception across cities? Again, while we offer no definitive answers at this point, two potential explanations for a convergence of viewpoint across cities are worthy of consideration.

First, the strategic incentives of city decision-makers, both governmental and nongovernmental, can influence thinking on economic development. In this regard, the financial and electoral motives of developers and local elected officials, as discussed earlier, can play a key role in promoting numerous economic development initiatives (see Molotch 1976; Feiock and Kim 2001). The quest by developers for profits and the desire for local politicians to gain reelection are motivations that cross city boundary lines. Certainly, the financial motives of developers and electoral motives of city office-holders might explain the consistently high value city leaders placed on economic development to the city (responses to the question, ‘How important are economic development efforts for your city?’).

Second, convergence in economic development perceptions among city leaders across different cities potentially has to do with isomorphic processes. Borrowing from DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) discussion of isomorphic processes, one such process involves the dissemination of information that occurs as the result of attendance at state, regional and national professional conferences, such as the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). Through this process, a fundamental orientation toward city economic development can spread across leaders of diverse communities. A related isomorphic process involves the city managers’ frequent policy-making role relative to city councils. City managers do more than implement policy decided upon by their city council. Rather, a city manager can be relied on by a council for policy advice, and in some instances policy leadership (Teske and Schneider 1994; Zhang and Feiock 2009). Policy involvement by city managers is relevant in that city managers tend to have similar training and educational experiences, with the holding of a Master’s in Public Administration (MPA) being common. The MPA educational background for city managers is consistent with a field standard promoted by organizations such as the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA). Therefore, a shared orientation about economic development, from manager to mayor and council, may result from the specific training and education obtained by city managers.

**Conclusion**

Institutional city office-holders such as mayor, council member and manager tend to embrace a common perception regarding city economic development. This common perception likely provides a crucial foundation for coalition building in support of specific economic development proposals. Broad-based support for an economic development proposal is important for its success, and judging from our findings it seems likely that several factors push these city institutional position-holders in the direction of common viewpoints regarding city economic development. These potential factors include a shared culture, the financial and electoral
Institutionalized differences

motives of developers and elected city leaders, communication among city officials, and isomorphic processes of information dissemination. Future research might aim to unpack the various potential causes we have identified, to determine why perceptions related to economic development issues might be so similar across different institutional position-holders and across cities.

Future research might also consider additional factors such as the local political context. The level of political competition, for example, has been found to influence a community’s economic growth, as has the prevailing political ideology (Besley, Perrson and Sturm 2010; Betz, Partridge, Kraybill and Lobao 2012). City proximity to other communities might also be considered. Holding a leadership position in a geographically isolated community may impact economic development perceptions, in that these types of communities face unique economic development challenges (see e.g. King, Peredo and Chrisman 2009; Stephens and Partridge 2011). Further, city characteristics such as population size and socioeconomic characteristics might influence city leaders’ perceptions and might be worthy of consideration.

Finally, the findings reported in this study are drawn from city leaders in one state in the United States – the state of Texas. Though the second most populous state in the United States (behind California) Texas is still one among fifty states. The findings presented in this study could be expanded to include city leaders in other states especially to the extent that cultural milieu has an influence on perceptions. This would allow research to determine the generalizability of the findings presented here (i.e. the breadth of convergence in economic development viewpoint). Future study might also include a wider range of city leaders such as heads of city departments. Their perceptions might tell us something about the depth of similarity in economic development viewpoint among city office-holders.

As a foundation for future research, our present study reveals wide-spread convergence of perception regarding economic development issues among city mayors, managers and council members in the second most populous state in the United States – the state of Texas.

References


Institutionalized differences


Appendix

Survey questions

Importance of economic development

How important are economic development efforts for your city?

Important Unimportant

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Economic challenges facing the city

What are the specific economic challenges presently facing your city? (You may identify more than one)

Lack of jobs
Lack of high paying jobs
Rising costs (e.g. fuel)
Lack of economic diversity
Lack of sufficient revenue
Declining/restrictive state grants

Resource limitations

What are the primary challenges to your office’s efforts to attract more development to your city? (Designate all the apply)

Lack of staff committed to development
City’s image
Lack of partners to collaborative with on projects
Funding costs associated with development initiatives
Lack of support within city government for development initiatives
Other problems have priority among employees
Lack of expertise in economic development among employees
Inability to communicate with potential new businesses

Lack of political commitment to attracting more development

Importance of support from others

For an economic development proposal to be adopted and implemented by your city, how important is it that the proposal has support from:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support From</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
<th>Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business leaders in your community</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6  7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens or citizen groups in your city</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6  7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other city leaders</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6  7</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>