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Governing Small-Town America Today: The Promise and Dilemma of Dense Networks

Evidence in Public Administration

Abstract: *This essay examines the governance of small towns in the United States. Small towns have received little attention in the public administration literature to date, yet 1 in 10 Americans still lives in one, representing roughly 75 percent of all municipalities in the United States and some 33 million people. Small towns are characterized as dense, multiplex networks that lend unique dynamics to local politics. However, they face significant social, economic, technological, and demographic trends that compromise towns' prevailing frame of reference, fracture their networks, and alter the traditional setting of small-town governance. In the face of these issues, "thicker," more active ways of engaging the public are needed to reknit community bonds and build civic capacity. Service learning for master of public administration students is proposed as a way to develop the emotional intelligence necessary to make sense of the complex social dynamics of small towns and to facilitate the hard work of building enabling relationships.*

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Small towns occupy an ambiguous place in the American political imagination. Think, for example, about the 1998 film *Pleasantville.* In Pleasantville, life is orderly, predictable, and, as many of the characters confirm, downright *pleasant.* Neighbors know one another and seem to treat one another with care and concern. But there is a dark underbelly. The residents are also closed-minded and unwelcoming of change and difference. In his recent study, sociologist Robert Wuthnow writes that a similar duality characterizes media coverage of small towns. On the one side, there are "wouldn't it be nice?" nostalgia pieces, and on the other, portrayals of a "sorry remnant of an America that has been left behind . . . [home] of hapless, poorly educated Americans who have little better to do than watch the grass grow" (2013, xii).

In contrast to these stereotypical portrayals in film and the media, Rhonda Riherd Trautman offers an on-the-ground view of the challenges of governing in a real small town today in her article "Small-Town Policy Makers."[1] She shows that these towns share many of the same issues as large cities: how to encourage broader public involvement, work with contentious residents and overcome factionalism, and make the most of new information technologies. Other research indicates that small towns also deal with "big city" issues such as racial polarization, drugs, poverty, immigration, and increasing diversity (Carr, Lichter, and Kefals 2012; Lichter and Brown 2011). But, as Trautman writes, small towns do remain distinctive: their social and geographic scale can create particular dynamics that lend a unique quality to governing that deserves more attention from researchers.

In this sense, Trautman's article is particularly welcome in this new section of *Public Administration Review.* First, while the United States is an increasingly urbanized society, 1 in 10 Americans still lives in a small town; yet small-town government is one of the least researched arenas of governance. Second, the intertwined issues that she raises point to the challenge of mobilizing evidence in a straightforward, instrumental manner to address governance dilemmas. This confirms that we do need practitioner stories to guide both *what* we research and *how* we teach (Hummel 1991).

Responding to the complexity of issues that confront leaders in small-town government is like a game of pick-up sticks.[2] Myriad issues overlap; pull on one and another shifts place, and getting that winning black stick out of the pile can seem nearly impossible. Small-town government is complicated because it is where nearly every issue of society comes home to roost, often in one-on-one "public encounters" (Bartels 2015) that are magnified and quite personalized.

In this response, we comment on some of the "sticks" in the pile. We want to emphasize, however, that there is great variation in the political, economic, and historical specifics of each small town, and we do not know much about Trautman's town and its context. Thus, we offer relevant evidence from social research

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and Margaret Stout's own experience doing community development work in small-town Appalachia that, we hope, speaks to issues in both small-town America generally and Trautman's experience in particular.

Small Towns as Dense Networks

One way to understand small towns and their dynamics is to view them as *dense, multiplex* networks of relationships; as the saying goes, "everyone knows everyone." It is rarely the case, of course, that everyone really knows everyone. But this phrase works as shorthand to describe a situation in which "enough interaction does occur over sufficiently extended periods that people gain familiarity with one another, become visible in the community, and share background information with each other" (Wuthnow 2013, xv). In other words, even if everyone does not know you, "everyone knows your business" (Macgregor 2010, 3). To say these networks are multiplex is just to give a technical name to the reality that Trautman captures when she writes that elected officials may also be bankers, lawyers, doctors, business owners, teachers, pastors, and so on: people in small towns *encounter one another across multiple roles.*

As in the case Trautman describes, research shows that dense networks and multiplex relations have their upsides and downsides (Portes 1998). Advantageously, dense networks can be effective at enforcing and maintaining social norms. This can help produce solidarity and the kind of "we're in it together" community spirit that small-town life conjures. Dense, overlapping networks can also help the flow of information and increase the likelihood that people hear the same information from more than one source. This, in turn, can speed diffusion of information and actually encourage behavior change (Centola and Macy 2007). Well-known areas of research on these kinds of benefits are immigrant enclaves in cities. In these communities, various kinds of social, human, and financial capital flow through the networks, enabled by regulating norms. In theory, small towns' dense, multiplex relations can create norms that are empowering and community oriented.

However, these same dense relationships and norms can be exclusionary and constraining. For example, one of the typical expectations in small-town America is self-sufficiency and "not to be burden on the community . . . unless you are in desperate straits" (Wuthnow 2013, 120). Sherman's (2006) study of a small town in Northern California demonstrates how relational pressures encouraged poor residents to develop "socially acceptable" coping strategies outside the welfare system. This can create unique difficulties for poorer members of small towns.

Trautman's commentary attributes similar social norms and political dynamics to "proximity." Her depictions of small-town politics are substantiated in other studies, where a thicket of interpersonal dynamics complicates attempts at collaborative governance between residents and formal groups (Stout 2015; Stout and Kunz 2015). First, small-town norms of civility and conviviality (Wuthnow 2013) may discourage direct confrontation and open conflict, thereby encouraging backroom dealings that may break open meeting laws and generating gossip and rumors that quickly spread across town. Second, these dense relations may discourage people from public service in both elected and formal volunteer positions (Stout, Dougherty, and Dudley, forthcoming). Third, they can lead to incivility among factions that do not engage with one another personally or through business dealings. Fourth, just as in any other instance of pressure politics, they lead to preferential policy decisions based on social and business ties. Thus, small towns can vacillate between "rancorous conflict" and "superficial harmony"—both of which hamper effective policy making and implementation (Flora and Flora 1993, 51).

The Changing Nature of American Small Towns

For many residents of small towns, the town *is* its people. But many small towns today are changing rapidly and facing new stressors that push and pull on interpersonal relationships. In other words, "the people" are changing in important ways (Catlaw 2007), and this creates new challenges and opportunities for government.

For starters, over the last several decades, there has been considerable out-migration of the more highly educated, human-capital-rich members of small towns. This "brain drain" (Lichter and Brown 2011; Weber et al. 2007) often leaves behind an aging population and an anemic economy. Yet this vacuum invites new migration trends.

While small towns have rarely been as homogeneous as Pleasantville (Macgregor 2010, especially chapters 4 and 5), small towns are more diverse than ever. For example, many are new destinations for predominantly poor Latino/a immigrants that bring with them new languages, norms, and transnational social ties (Lichter and Brown 2011). This can threaten people's sense of "belonging" and alienate new arrivals from social and political engagement (Chavez 2009; McConnell and Miraftab 2009). There can be strong social pressures to conform to dominant largely white, middle-class norms (Leitner 2012).

At the other end of the economic spectrum, small-town America is increasingly desirable as providing recreational, leisure, and retirement amenities for urban dwellers. These "external" audiences shape gentrification dynamics that can, for instance, pit economic development against environmental and agricultural protection. This can also entail an influx of newcomers—often affluent and educated—with "urban" sensibilities and expectations. These demographic changes generate new cleavages to bridge before communities can benefit from the infusion of new kinds of human and social capital (Lichter and Brown 2011; Salamon 2003).

Finally, as Trautman notes, information technology is an ever more important part of government today (Mergel 2012; Zavattaro and Bryer 2016). While we can constructively use the Internet to build community (Castells 2015), technologies are shaping small-town life in complex ways. First, information technologies can further unsettle the boundedness of small-town networks. Even residents in remote areas now access infinite news, media, and information sources from around the globe. This complicates "the local" as the prevailing frame of reference at the same time that it opens communities to new ideas and information. Second, the anonymity of many online platforms can cut against the power of visibility and familiarity in small-town networks (Borah 2013). For example, one of the more toxic platforms is Topix.com, which ostensibly exists to bring to light "Your Town. Your News. Your Take." While laudable

in theory, posts often contain diatribes and misinformation about anyone who dares step into a community leadership role. However, it may be possible to moderate such online forums in ways that encourage civil, productive exchanges without censoring criticism (Lampe et al. 2014).

In short, to varying degrees American small towns are being shaped by economic and demographic forces that complicate the potential of dense networks to stage positive change. But the opportunities afforded by the small scale and multiplex relationships of small towns remain.

Rebuilding Civic Infrastructure though Thicker Participation

To make the most of this potential, small-town governments need to think broadly about the importance of building and strengthening community capacity (Chaskin et al. 2001). Trautman seems to support this idea when she writes of "building a strong community base." While they often get the most attention, financial, technical, and physical resources are not always the missing ingredient. Paradoxically, while community members frequently laud "the people" of their towns as their most treasured asset, dysfunctional relationships among them hinder their ability to collaborate—even when ample opportunities for economic growth and revitalization are at hand (Stout 2015). Thus, the challenge is to build bridges across difference through relational attitudes, cooperative interpersonal styles, and participatory modes of association that enable integrative approaches to collective action (Stout and Love 2015). This work can leverage the potential of the social and geographic scale of small towns.

Indeed, flourishing communities provide the civic infrastructure necessary to build robust bridging networks (National Civic League 1999), enabling other resources to be mobilized. Flora and Flora's (1993) extensive fieldwork on social infrastructure in rural communities confirms this. Stout's (2015) preliminary study of Appalachian towns explores specific barriers to the development of effective social and civic infrastructure that are similar to the challenges Trautman describes. Without question, strengthening these networks requires patience and the ability to engage difference and conflict as a creative opportunity. But it *can* be done. The work emphasizes process rather than winning or losing; depersonalizing politics; cultivating a broad, diversified sense of who "we" are in community; and sharing leadership and decision-making roles beyond established civic and political leaders (Flora and Flora 1993).

Unfortunately, traditional public engagement typically constrains dialogue to serial one-way statements between the public and decision makers. Building civic infrastructure requires robust, face-to-face public encounters and "thick" forms of public engagement (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). These participatory practices aim to foster mutual understanding and meaningful policy influence (see, e.g., King 2011; King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Roberts 2004). Well-known examples include citizen assemblies, citizen juries, and study circles. In the context of small towns, participatory budgeting may hold promise because it involves opening up both the decision-making and resource-allocation process for specific portions of the local budget (see http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/). While participatory budgeting has been used only selectively in the United States in large cities, experiences in Latin America and Canada show it can be done in small towns. Indeed Clarkson, Georgia (population about 7,500), launched its first participatory budgeting effort in July 2015. It is critical, though, that public managers be clear about the purpose of these efforts, and thoughtful in the design and implementation of them. Disingenuous, poorly planned, or half-hearted efforts to involve the public can do more harm than good (Bryer 2011).

"The Blame Game"

Understandably, Trautman might find some of these suggestions unworkable. If people do not read informational flyers, how can we expect them to come to participatory meetings? She attributes the public's lack of participation in governance to "indifference, lack of time, or information." However, the story is more complicated. "Apathy" is often attributable to repeated experiences of ineffectual participation (Stout 2010). Other research generally confirms that there is an increasingly strong class inflection in American political participation (Leighley and Nagler 2013; Gilens and Page 2014). Institutional experiences at home, work, and school also can contribute to whether people engage in political and civic life (Kupchik and Catlaw 2015; Rawlings and Catlaw 2011).

Clearly, government cannot control all the factors that shape whether people participate. But it needs to shoulder its share of the blame for a lack of constructive public engagement and limited success in including its full community. A much more active, informed, and committed effort from government is needed to strengthen civic capacity.

Getting Administrators Ready to Go

In closing, we want to echo Trautman's concerns about the education of master of public administration (MPA) students. One fruitful response to the limited public management literature on small-town governance is field-based experiential learning. Indeed, the inability of theory to meet the complexities of real world practice is one motivation for service learning through MPA capstone courses, applied research assignments, and internships (Stout and Holmes 2013). It also speaks to the importance of "pracademics" (Posner 2009), clinical professors, and professors of practice.

Service learning is designed to produce curriculum-driven learning outcomes and applied research knowledge (Stout 2013). Analytical reflection on those experiences fosters the linkage of theory and practice (Collier and Williams 2005; Cunningham 1997; Imperial, Perry, and Katula 2007; Stout and Holmes 2013). These pedagogies prepare students for real-world expectations of self-direction, teamwork, and interorganizational conflict and collaboration (Abel 2009; Bushouse and Morrison 2001; Dicke, Dowden, and Torres 2004; Imperial, Perry, and Katula 2007; Killian 2004; Lambright and Lu 2009; Waldner and Hunter 2008; Whitaker and Berner 2004). Perhaps of greatest interest here is the opportunity to develop the emotional intelligence (Kramer 2007) necessary to make sense of the complex social dynamics of small towns and to facilitate the hard work of building enabling relationships.

In the end, we suggest that the unique interpersonal dynamics of small towns are under great strain, making it ever more challenging to govern and build community. In the face of new challenges,

"thicker," more active ways of engaging the public are needed to reknit community bonds and build civic capacity.

Notes

1. It is hard to define "small town" in a single way that is satisfying for all purposes. Population, population density, commuting rates to a central metropolis, and levels of "urbanization" are used. The issue has become even more difficult as the line between urban and rural blurs (Lichter and Brown 2011). For purposes of this article, we follow Wuthnow (2013, 8) and loosely define "small towns" as jurisdictions of fewer than 25,000 residents that are not considered part of an "urban fringe." This represents roughly 75 percent of all towns and cities in the United States and includes some 33 million people.
2. In the game of pick-up sticks, also called jackstraws or spillikins, a bundle of multicolored sticks is held vertically on a flat surface and then released. The sticks fall at random, creating a jumbled, disordered field or pile of sticks. Players remove as many sticks as possible without disturbing the other sticks. The goal is to remove a single black stick.

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