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Frame the Consolidation Debate with a Sound Argument: A Reply to a Response

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The most persuasive argument in favor of city–county consolidation has been—and remains—economic development through the formation of a strong and attractive regional community identity. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that appeals to voters based on reducing inner-city/suburban socioeconomic inequity and enhancing administrative efficiency are a recipe for failed consolidation campaigns.

We are happy that our recent study of modern city–county consolidation efforts is generating interest in the academic community. In our recent *PAR* article, “When Efficiency Is Unbelievable: Normative Lessons from 30 Years of City–County Consolidations” (July/August 2005), we offered a new model of city–county consolidation to analyze 12 local government consolidations attempted during the last three decades. Using a rigorously designed comparative case-study method, we identify the critical variables that explain why some consolidations are successful and others fail. We find that arguments for consolidation fail when they are based on the increased equity to be gained in a redistribution of revenues from suburban to central cities. Traditional arguments based on increased efficiency from merging two bureaucracies are also unsuccessful. Instead, we find that the essential elements of a successful consolidation attempt are civic elites who are able to define an economic development vision for the community, determine that the existing political structure of multiple, competing jurisdictions is incapable of supporting and implementing that vision, and then successfully convince the voters that city–county consolidation is the key to economic development that will benefit the whole community, not just the elites.

We are confident that our rigorous comparative case-study design, the first such empirical study that systematically tests hypotheses embedded in a causal model of consolidation attempts, provides important insights into the key factors that account for whether consolidation efforts are successful. Feiock, Carr,

and Johnson critique our efforts to identify a set of arguments or charter provisions that lead to successful consolidation, arguing that the critical factor is how participants use heresthetical arguments in campaigns (i.e., how each side frames the issue in terms capable of achieving majority support for their side). We cannot disagree that problem framing is key to consolidation campaigns; in fact, that is precisely our central argument.

Framing consolidation as an economic development issue is an effort to argue that the major benefit from consolidation is future economic development. Successful consolidation efforts focus on long-term benefits rather than the short-term “efficiencies” gained from cutting government spending by eliminating duplication (the benefit touted by losing consolidation proponents). We stress that framing the issue as one of economic development, as opposed to improved local government efficiency, is precisely the strategic route for successful consolidations. One cannot disconnect the substance of the consolidation argument from the way it is framed; problem framing is all about focusing attention on the substance the framer wants to debate. That is what we argue.

The central point of our analysis is that it does not take much to successfully oppose consolidations, unless proponents frame the issue as one of future economic gains. It does not matter what types of coalitions formed to oppose the Tallahassee–Leon County consolidation effort (for example); the proponents did not frame the consolidation as an economic development tool, and they lost.

The critique regarding heresthetical rule manipulations is an interesting point. Feiock, Carr, and Johnson note that consolidation was approved in Athens–Clarke County, Georgia, when proponents were able to secure election rules requiring majorities in the city and the entire county (not just the unincorporated areas). This point is an amplification of our hypothesis that institutional rules matter. Across 12 cases, we were not

able to identify critical rules that mattered to make any sweeping generalizations about consolidation attempts. The Athens–Clarke County example cited in the critique is just that, an example; we are in search of systematic evidence to support the hypothesis. Other cases, such as the Louisville–Jefferson County merger, offer evidence that favorable institutional rules were required to achieve consolidation success. We hope that our framework spurs other scholarship to support or refute our findings based on systematic evidence.

Finally, we wish to respond to the critique that “supporters and opponents use heresthetical strategies to exploit latent attitudes in the community as they struggle over [the consolidation] issue.” Feiock, Carr, and Johnson suggest that we miss the “fundamental dynamic of these events. . . . city–county consolidation is not about efficiency, racial division, or even economic development” but instead how proponents and opponents manipulate “latent attitudes in the community.” We reject this assessment, partly on lack of evidence, but mostly on the basis of our evidence. To the first point, the Johnson and Carr (2004) study cited in the critique provides no evidence of latent

community attitudes toward consolidation; it is hard to see how the views of city managers and planners can be held to represent such. To the second point, we offer a simple objection: The substance of the argument matters—economic development arguments have won, and efficiency arguments have lost (Leland and Thurmaier 2004). If critics find other substantive arguments that win consolidation referenda, we stand ready to reconsider our position. Until then, we look forward to alternative models based on evidence, not heresthetical arguments.

References

- Johnson, Linda S., and Jered B. Carr. 2004. Making the Case for (and against) City–County Consolidation: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis. In *City–County Consolidation and Its Alternatives: Reshaping the Local Government Landscape*, edited by Jered B. Carr and Richard Feiock, 246–90. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
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