



Participatory urban governance under the microscope: A qualitative study of high-functioning neighborhood councils in Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

With the neighborhood seen as the ideal unit for participatory modes of governance, many cities in the United States have established formal systems of neighborhood councils to increase civic participation, improve service delivery, and enhance democracy. Los Angeles boasts the most extensive neighborhood council system, which was founded in 1999, in the country. Through a qualitative study of two neighborhood councils in LA, this study investigates how neighborhood councils influence land use and policy decision-making. It finds that political capital, negotiation, and associational leverage are the most important tools for these councils in exerting influence. In doing so, the authors suggest that the oft-cited justifications for pursuing formalized modes of participatory urban governance do not take into consideration the sociopolitical dimensions of urban regimes, and suggest three propositions for future research on neighborhood governance systems.

Introduction

For years, scholars have examined the potential for citizen participation in local decision-making to improve urban governance and enhance deliberative democracy. From empirical analysis to normative discussion, these scholarly conversations have been widely influential in the practice of urban planning and administration. By the end of the 20th century, many cities had developed systems of neighborhood-level governance whereby residents could actively participate in the development and implementation of a broad set of community development initiatives (Scavo, 1993). Today, many cities have elaborated on these early models by institutionalizing citywide neighborhood governance systems whereby residents are elected to formal boards, and these “councils” are allocated annual funding. Debate abounds as to the appropriate structure and management of these participatory governance systems (Chaskin & Garg, 1997).

Having established a neighborhood council system over two decades ago, the City of Los Angeles has been the subject of numerous evaluations by scholars interested in neighborhood governance (Cooper & Musso, 1999; J. Musso et al., 2007, 2011). The recommendations they put forth seek to level the playing field by ensuring all neighborhood councils function effectively and thereby have the ability to participate actively in city government and inform decision-making. While scholars have examined how civic organizations (Lelieveldt et al., 2009) and nonprofit organizations (Fyall, 2016) shape policy, the ways in which formal neighborhood councils exert influence has been understudied. To fill this gap, this study explores how high-functioning neighborhood councils operate, and the strategies they employ to influence local land use and policy decision-making. Through a qualitative study of two neighborhood councils in Los Angeles, this study finds that such

entities exert power and influence through their willingness and preference to negotiate with developers, political capital, and use of associational leverage. These findings suggest that successful participatory governance is a function of the sociopolitical dimensions of urban governance more generally, and represents the expansion and consolidation of an urban regime. This raises important questions about whether the reasons for pursuing participatory governance systems—i.e., improving governance and enhancing democracy—are justified. In discussing these questions, this paper offers four testable propositions for future research on the role and influence of neighborhood councils in shaping local policy.

Neighborhood-level governance systems

With the neighborhood acting as the site for the provision of goods and services, it is often seen as the ideal unit for participatory modes of governance. By 1990 more than half of those U.S. cities with populations greater than 100,000 had developed some form of neighborhood-level governance (Scavo, 1993), the justification being that by involving citizens in the local policymaking process would lead to better calibrated policies and improve the public's confidence in local government (Valelly et al., 1993). Neighborhood-level governance models can and has taken a variety of forms: ad-hoc programs that target specific neighborhoods in order to build capacity and local partnerships (Chaskin & Abunimah, 1999; Fagotto & Fung, 2006); partnerships with existing nonprofit organizations, including community development corporations (Chaskin & Greenberg, 2015); the creation of formalized "Neighborhood Council" systems with predefined boundaries, structured bylaws, public elections, and municipal resource allocations (Cooper & Musso, 1999); or entire ecosystems of numerous, overlapping neighborhood associations, including homeowners' associations (Chaskin, 2003; Craw, 2017; Hur & Bollinger, 2014).

Supporters of neighborhood-level governance point to a variety of benefits. By connecting directly with local residents on issues impacting them, some argue that neighborhood-level governance can improve service delivery (Berry et al., 1993; Box, 1998; Kelly & Swindell, 2002; Thomas, 1987). Others have claimed that neighborhood governance organizations allow residents to better communicate their policy and political preferences, thereby improving democratic representation (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Coaffee & Healey, 2003; Jones, 1980). Neighborhood organizations can also help develop "social capital" that will make for a more connected, informed, and civically engaged citizenry (Granovetter, 1973; Pateman, 1970; Putnam, 2000; Torney-Purta et al., 2004). From the perspective of public administration, these innovations are considered a necessary response to the proliferation of information technology, declining trust in government, and privatization of public services (Frederickson, 1992; Kettl, 2015; Smith, 1993). From a social justice perspective, because neighborhood governance bodies exist between the state and the populace, they are best-positioned to promote a more just and inclusive planning process at the neighborhood scale (Rosen & Avni, 2019; Yinon-Amoyal & Kallus, 2005). Yet evidence of whether participatory governance can transform hierarchical structures of urban governance and their institutional cultures is mixed (Coaffee & Healey, 2003).

Neighborhood governance does have its critics, however. Many argue that the privileging of localism can lead to parochialism by exacerbating power dynamics rather than ameliorating them, ultimately benefiting wealthy, homeowner-dominant neighborhoods at the expense of low-income neighborhoods (Dear, 1992; Park et al., 2018; Purcell, 2006; Raco & Flint, 2001). More recent work has demonstrated that the emphasis on local control that undergirds neighborhood governance systems inhibits the ability of cities to engage in the kind centralized decision-making needed to address regional issues, such as housing crises (Einstein et al., 2020). Given that neighborhood governance bodies are led by volunteers, they also tend to represent the interests of more powerful constituencies, elites, or small proactive groups of residents that have the time and resources available to commit to local activism (Park et al., 2018; Rosen & Avni, 2019; Zaban, 2019).

Aside from empirical work on the pros and cons of neighborhood governance, there is also a normative discussion about the ways in which neighborhood governance fulfills democratic ideals held dear in Western society. According to some, citizen participation in governance can be advocated on moral grounds regardless of whether it results in more efficient or effective policies and programs (Kathi & Cooper, 2005). Others argue that neighborhood council systems are the best way that cities can combat the historical entrenchment of government corruption and marginalization of minorities (Parlow, 2010). In the United States in particular there is a strong historical and philosophical justification for participation for participation's sake. Early theorists have argued that effective governance begins at the grassroots (Follett, 1918) and that substantial public deliberation is necessary for government to be responsive to its citizens (Dewey, 1927). In this line of thinking, whether cities invest in neighborhood governance is not a question of policy or management but a question of democratic values. Parlow argues that neighborhood councils have the potential to infuse "civic republicanism" into American life, suggesting that "the key to this dialogic process is that the engaged stakeholders, through arguing, discussion, persuasion, and the like, ultimately reach agreement on what is best for all those involved" (2008, p. 177). Nevertheless, it is worth noting there is an emerging participatory governance movement in Europe as well, in an attempt to regain citizen's trust in political institutions and combat social exclusion (Bherer, 2010).

The Los Angeles neighborhood council system

In this context, Los Angeles, which has the largest neighborhood council system in the United States, has received considerable scholarly attention. The LA system was founded in 1999 during the City's charter reform and in the aftermath of an attempted secession by communities in Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley (Cooper & Musso, 1999). According to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), the municipal agency that governs the neighborhood councils system, the primary role of neighborhood councils is to "gather, vet, debate, and come to a consensus on matters that impact City life and policy, and deliver their official stance on these issues in letters called 'Community Impact Statements'"¹ Neighborhood councils have some autonomy in writing their by-laws, which dictate board structure (e.g., number of seats, types of stakeholders represented), board size, and term limits. However, all councils are required to meet monthly and adhere to local, state, and federal standards that other city officials and agencies must observe with regards to processes of decision-making and public comment, among others. Participation on neighborhood councils is open to anyone who lives, works, or owns property within their designated area, and is even open to undocumented stakeholders.

Despite what many consider an inhospitable environment neighborhood-level participatory governance (J. Musso et al., 2011), today the city continues to invest substantial resources in the neighborhood council system through its Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which allocates \$42,000 to each council annually and aids with capacity building, conflict resolution, and board elections. Neighborhood council board members are also given participation privileges, such as being granted additional time to provide public comment during city council hearings. In fact, many cities look to LA's system as a model to replicate (Collins, *In press*). At the time of writing, LA's neighborhood council system is comprised of 99 councils that covers the entire geography of the city.²

There are many reasons to look to Los Angeles as a model. For some, it is a powerful example of how neighborhood governance systems provide a forum for minorities to meaningfully engage in the political life of the city, which is important in a city with a broad history of racial and ethnic strife. They point to the fact that despite poor representation among Hispanics, neighborhood councils have been a source of strong political participation and an engine for mobilization among Asian Americans (Chemersinsky & Kleiner, 2014). Jun and Musso demonstrate that low-income communities can use LA's neighborhood governance structures as venues to achieve their goals, such as preventing undesirable land uses (Jun & Musso, 2013). This is in spite of the fact that, like most local

participatory governance systems around the country, LA neighborhood councils only have advisory power (Berry et al., 1993). Finally, supporters also argue that by building connections between residents and municipal decision-makers, as well as across neighborhoods, LA's neighborhood council system has fostered citywide civic engagement and a larger "civic culture" in Los Angeles (J. A. Musso et al., 2006; Parlow, 2010).

Scrutiny of the LA system has led to reform efforts. Scholars at the University of Southern California have conducted comprehensive evaluations of the system in 2002, 2004 and 2007 to assess its progress and suggest policy recommendations (J. Musso et al., 2002, 2004, 2007). Successful neighborhood councils are characterized by high institutional capacity, effective engagement with their constituents, and a strong relationship with city government (J. Musso et al., 2007). Yet despite the existence of several strong neighborhood councils that successfully engage and act on behalf of their constituent communities, the authors consistently found that too many neighborhood councils are characterized by having poor capacity, weak relationships with the city, and a lack of diversity on their boards (J. Musso et al., 2004, 2007). They suggest both micro and macro policy changes, from establishing conflict resolution protocols to revising the city charter and program goals. More recently, scholars have studied the perceived effectiveness of neighborhood councils and found that those board members believe their council to be most effective if they have strong internal capacity, participate in external networking, and adequately respond and take action on residents' concerns (Li et al., 2019). Consistent over the years, however, has been the suggestion that the city invest more in community capacity building support to further educate neighborhood council boards on municipal administrative processes, building technical and professional expertise (Li et al., 2019; J. Musso et al., 2011). This is largely in response to the inherent inequities that exist in terms of neighborhood council institutional capacity across communities with varying socioeconomic, demographic, and residential compositions.

With the Los Angeles system now consolidated across the city's geography, the purpose of this study is to reexamine the neighborhood council system—and in particular its most *high-functioning* councils—through a closer lens. That many cities are beginning to question the effectiveness and equity of neighborhood governance systems (Collins, *In press*) makes such micro-level analyses even more important. This study also aims to bring together research on neighborhood governance systems and public participation more broadly. Scholars have devoted ample attention to issues of representation and neighborhood councils' impact on civic engagement and social capital construction, but little attention has been paid to how neighborhood councils exert power and influence over local decision-making. And although recent scholarship has begun to unpack the influence that nonprofit organizations have in the policymaking process (Chin, 2009; Fyall, 2016; De Graauw, 2008; Marwell, 2004), as well as the role of civic organizations (Lelieveldt et al., 2009), the role of formal neighborhood councils—considered part of the state apparatus—is overlooked. However, like civic organizations, neighborhood councils participate in government-solicited forms of participation in which they contribute to the "coproduction" of public service (Marschall, 2004). To fully understand how neighborhood governance systems shape policy, we must therefore similarly interrogate the activities of these organizations at the neighborhood level.

Research design and methods

This case study utilizes qualitative methods, including structured and unstructured interviews and participant-observation, as well as archival research. The case selection process sought to identify neighborhood councils that are considerably "high-functioning." For the purposes of this paper, high-functioning is defined as neighborhood councils with (a) high levels of technical and professional capacity; and (b) high levels of public participation in city policymaking processes. To properly identify high-functioning neighborhood councils, the author worked with staff from DONE, which is responsible for overseeing the city's neighborhood council system.

First, DONE shared with the authors data on how many agendas and community impact statements (CIS) neighborhood councils have formally submitted over a 5-year period. Under California’s Brown Act, neighborhood councils are required to post agendas for any public meeting they hold 72 hours in advance. Community impact statements are formal documents that neighborhood councils may submit to the city council to make public the councils’ position on city council motions or agenda items, or simply to issue a public statement regarding ongoing policy issues. The number of agendas and CISs submitted was therefore used as a proxy for institutional capacity. The two councils selected posted 47 and 60 CISs, respectively, during the year examined, whereas the average for all neighborhood councils in Los Angeles was 6.6.

Second, the author conducted interviews with DONE staff on their experiences working with various neighborhood councils across the city. This aided in identifying two neighborhood councils that not only have high institutional capacity, but are also considered by the Department to be highly engaged with residents in their community and city officials. In the end, two councils—Hollywood Hills West and Los Feliz—were selected. In addition to being located in the same neighborhood council district and Los Angeles Community Plan Area—which ensured both councils are engaged in a similar geographical area and therefore interacting with the same city officials—the two communities are also similar demographically. Tables 1 and 2 below depict the respective demographics of the areas compared with that of the Los Angeles metropolitan statistical area. As shown, both neighborhoods have similar demographics, and are considerably whiter and wealthier than the city as a whole.

The similarity between the two areas allowed the authors to minimize the number of exogenous variables influencing the analysis. As such, this study utilizes the “extreme case” case study design (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), in which the rareness of one particular variable—the councils’ high-functioning status—is observed in order to probe for its effects and generate propositions for future studies of the larger population.

Following case selection, the authors conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with a variety of community stakeholders (See Table 3) and engaged in approximately 50 hours of participant-observation of neighborhood council meetings. This leg of research took place from July 2019 to April 2020.

Table 1. Racial and ethnic demographic of study area.

	Total Population	White	Black	Asian-Pacific Islander	Hispanic	Other
Los Feliz	35,057	67%	2%	11%	13%	7%
Hollywood Hills West	36,174	71%	5%	8%	11%	5%
Los Angeles	13,262,234	30%	6%	16%	45%	3%

Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

Table 2. Poverty levels of study area.

	Below 100% Poverty Level	100–149% Poverty Level	Above 150% Poverty Level
Los Feliz	10%	8%	82%
Hollywood Hills West	13%	7%	80%
Los Angeles	15%	10%	75%

Source: 2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

Table 3. Semi-structured interviews with stakeholder types.

Stakeholder Type	Interviews
Los Feliz Board members	6
HHW Board members	6
Community Organizations	8
City Officials	10
Developers	3
TOTAL	35

Interviews were conducted with neighborhood council board members, leaders of local community organizations, city officials,³ and developers.⁴ Interviewee recruitment began by focusing on neighborhood council board members. Of those neighborhood council board members interviewed, 42% were female and 58% were male. All those interviewed, 75% worked in fields that require an advanced professional degree, and the remaining respondents were business owners. Most notably, each council had executive board members with backgrounds in law and real estate. The knowledge and technical capacity of board members is an important characteristic, as will be discussed later. Participant-observation of council meetings allowed the authors to identify and recruit those individuals—city officials and developers—that interact frequently with each council. In addition, the authors utilized the snowball technique to identify additional interviewees considered to be prominent civic and political actors in the area.

Interviews were conducted primarily in-person (three were done over the phone) at either the respondents' home, place of work, or an agreed upon local in the community such as a coffee shop or restaurant. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and utilized a questionnaire that varied only slightly across stakeholder types. The questionnaire focused on the perceptions and experiences of each neighborhood council (or alternatively, of city officials), relationships between council members and city officials, and on specific instances or examples of how neighborhood councils have influenced city decision-making. The majority of interviews were done with city officials in order to assess how neighborhood councils shape policy from the perspective of key decision-makers.

Participant-observation was conducted at full neighborhood council meetings as well as neighborhood council committee meetings.⁵ The purpose of these observations was to document the quality of board deliberation, community engagement, and interactions with city officials. For example, the authors made note of how many residents and city officials attended meetings, how many spoke during public comment, what community issues were raised and how neighborhood council members responded, as well as the nature of debate and voting behavior on particular issues. During participant-observations, the authors were also able to conduct over 25 unstructured interviews with local residents on matters raised during the meeting and their perceptions of the neighborhood council and city officials.

Interview transcriptions and field notes were analyzed using grounded theory and informed by qualitative content analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Krippendorff, 2013). In analyzing interview texts, both authors conducted coding using Dedoose in order to identify emergent themes among stakeholder responses. After an initial round of coding, the authors cross-referenced the codes they each developed to validate and triangulate emerging themes and control for individual biases. Once a common list of codes was developed, a second round of coding was conducted to quantify which codes were most frequently identified across interviews and field notes transcripts. Moreover, a second round of coding allowed the authors to identify social networks across a variety of interviewees. In some cases, a follow-up interview was conducted with respondents to further trace interactions across key stakeholders and examine the strength of relationships between respondents. Lastly, archival research was conducted to compile community impact statements submitted by each neighborhood council. A content analysis of these documents allowed the authors to document and analyze the persistence of particular political and policy agendas within each neighborhood council across time.

Findings and analysis

This study's findings point to a number of important elements of high-functioning neighborhood councils that allow them to influence policy decision-making. Some of these themes have already been discussed in the literature, namely technical and professional competence, and effective engagement with both their community members and city officials (J. Musso et al., 2007). This paper, therefore, focuses on those emergent themes not previously discussed; elements of high-functioning neighborhood councils that represent the complex sociopolitical dimensions of

participatory urban governance. Each of these themes—willingness and preference to negotiate, political capital, and associational leverage—will be discussed in turn.

Willingness and preference to negotiate

An emergent characteristic of high-functioning neighborhood councils is their willingness and preference to negotiate on local land use issues and policy decisions. Their *willingness* to negotiate distinguishes them from typical NIMBY groups who are likely to default to oppositional positions. Field observations revealed that neighborhood council members that opposed new developments in their area cited various and nuanced justifications for their action. For example, some neighborhood council members concerned with housing unaffordability opposed projects that included some affordable housing units because they were not affordable enough. Others that often resisted the opening of new businesses with liquor licenses were supportive if the business owner agreed to offer employees public transportation cards to disincentive their car-use. As recent scholars have similarly shown, people's behavior toward controversial projects is not merely motivated by material self-interest but is also shaped by context-specific social and cultural factors, such as how residents frame their community and their role within it (Ocejo, 2020).

High-functioning neighborhood councils' *preference* to negotiate embodies the intention of participatory modes of urban governance. A preference to negotiate means that neighborhood councils do not view land use decision-making as a zero-sum game. Instead, they use their formal position within land use entitlement processes to achieve outcomes that meet local preferences, be they esthetic—e.g., facade color and landscape architecture—or social—e.g., affordable housing and tenants' rights. Both the preference and willingness to negotiate is attractive to many developers, who often need to demonstrate their meaningful engagement with neighborhood councils in order to obtain approval for their project by their city councilmember. According to two developers interviewed:

I would say they are reasonable if you bring a development to them that is reasonable. I think that that's really their priority, just to protect their neighborhoods and make sure that people are willing to work with them ... we worked with them on a Master plan for, geez, eight or ten years, and the neighborhood council was at the table the entire time. We spent a lot of time addressing traffic management issues in their neighborhood, and community benefits out of the project, so there was a lot of rolling up the sleeves and working together. (Interview with developer, 12/16/19)

I feel like neighborhood councils for the most part are providing an important civic service to their community, and I think they see themselves as like gatekeepers to the needs of the community ... and I think that feedback actually makes projects better. Because they live there, so they will give you like a better suggested route for traffic, or they will say this corner can be a problem because the land use doesn't have an entrance. So I think they often give back some helpful comments. (Interview with developer, 1/17/20)

As these quotes show, high-functioning neighborhood councils are neither seen as intensely oppositional nor as a "rubber stamp."

Nevertheless, the negotiation process also highlights the importance of time and resources in ensuring successful outcomes. The developer in the above quote refers to a master plan process that the neighborhood council was involved in for nearly a decade. The council's willingness to negotiate is therefore contingent on the technical competence of its members and their ability to invest significant time in a volunteer position, which is itself tied to socioeconomic factors. Moreover, both developers and city officials noted that while not entirely oppositional, the willingness and preference to negotiate does delay the development process substantially. For example, developers knowledgeable with the process of engaging with neighborhood councils reported often adding in an additional year of expenses to their budget to adequately prepare for the negotiation process around particular entitlements, such as liquor licenses and zoning variances. Neighborhood councils that are willing to negotiate, therefore, must be willing to negotiate on particular projects over an extended period of time.

Taken together, although neighborhood councils in Los Angeles are considered “advisory,” they do wield influence during the negotiation process to shape the size and scope of projects so that they adhere to the tastes and preferences of local residents. And, if city councilmembers emphasize the importance of neighborhood council engagement, developers must take part in this mode of participatory governance to signal their care for resident concerns. According to the Planning Director for one city councilmember:

If you are doing work in this town you don't really want to anger a neighborhood council on all your little stuff, because if you do that and then you have a giant project, that history of the relationship is going to matter a great deal. If you have a history of saying, 'hey the building is going to be red', and then you go and build a blue building, and you do that a hundred times, when you go for your biggest thing that you need, [the councilmember] is going to be like 'hey this guy lies to everyone'. So that is one of the reasons to behave. But the other reason is even small cases can sometimes go all the way up to the city council level, and we don't want to be dealing with pissed off neighborhood councils ... Overtime that builds up into some kind of pressure. (Interview with city official, 12/18/19)

Developers who reciprocate neighborhood councils' preference to negotiate are therefore seen favorably by city officials who ultimately hold the most influence over the outcome of their project. This pressure, or leverage, can be multiplied through the networks of other resident associations that neighborhood council members work with or belong to.

Political capital

Interviews revealed networks of political capital between neighborhood council board members and city (and in some cases state) administrators or elected officials. Scholars have long known that relationships, or social capital, are key for solving collective action problems and enhancing upward mobility (Coleman, 1987; Granovetter, 1973; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, political capital is defined as the relational ties a constituent or constituents have with a politician that is rooted in institutional structures of the political order and results in increased positional power (Nee & Opper, 2010). Stocks of political capital stem from the organization's willingness and preference to negotiate, as frequent negotiation around land use involves repeated social exchange in which each party does something for the other and trusts they will reciprocate in the future.

The influence of high-functioning neighborhood councils can be directly tied to these strong political connections. While not all board members interviewed discussed personal political relationships, two patterns emerged: first, those holding leadership positions on council boards (e.g., presidents, vice-presidents, or committee chairs) held very strong personal political connections; and two, city officials noted their greater willingness to liaise with and respond to neighborhood council members from those considered to be high-functioning. As such, political capital here means both direct personal relationships as well as latent institutional connections between the city and high-functioning council members rooted in the positive perceptions held by the city that these councils' concerns are valid and worth responding to. In addition, what distinguishes this form of political capital from the “relationships with government” discussed in the literature is its informality—whereas previous scholars have evaluated the extent to which the city creates *institutional* avenues through which city officials and neighborhood councils can interact, political capital is about individually constructed relationships.

Many respondents noted that the strength of their relationship allows them to easily attain a direct phone call with a particular city council member or city administrator have them attend neighborhood gatherings. As one respondent noted:

Because we have a little more notoriety now, it is possible to get [city councilmember] on the phone or other people on the phone ... we have a good relationship with [their] office. We know a lot of their staff, and we are regularly in meetings and discussions with everybody from their deputy to their chief of staff ... We also have gone out of our way to build these relationships I make it a point to try and meet with every one of our

deputies for coffee or a drink just to get to know them, because we are working together, and we want to have that personal connection. So our recreation people now know the Director of Rec and Parks, the superintendent of Griffith Park, same thing with DOT, the LAPD and LAFD. (Interview with Los Feliz neighborhood council board member, 10/11/19)

Other respondents mentioned that they've had city and state officials "over for dinner," that they "know my name" or are "familiar with my face" (interviews with Los Feliz and HHW neighborhood council board members, 2019–2020). According to one neighborhood council board member, the strength of their connections with directors of municipal departments allows them to go "over the head" of field deputies, thereby circumventing the typical administrative channels residents must follow to have their issues resolved. According to her:

I mean these people and their reps are coming to our meetings. We have a huge turnout, fire department, police department, city councilmembers, even state assembly people. It took a while to break them in, and we had occasions where we had to kind of go over certain people's heads to get to the front of the line ... So it is those relationships where it actually allows you to improve your community. And those of us that have a little ounce of politics in our blood, and I have for a long time, you work your way from federal government to state to local government. But really it all starts here. (Interview with HHW neighborhood council board member, 2/10/20)

These relationships are leveraged in order to help neighborhood councils shape land use decision making or even draft new policy. For example, one city official explained that because of their close connection with the neighborhood council, whenever a developer approaches their office with a new idea their first response is "Go talk to the neighborhood council" (interview with author 2019). The Hollywood Hills West neighborhood council worked closely with their city councilmember to garner support for a draft ordinance regulating "party houses" that, made possible by AirBnb, were disrupting the quality of life of residents in the Hollywood hills.⁶ Those respondents involved in the development and advocacy for this ordinance articulated that it was largely the result of frequent and cooperative interaction between neighborhood council members and city council staff.

City council field deputies, whose responsibility it is to liaise with neighborhood councils and handle district casework, similarly noted the importance of these relationships to facilitate administrative processes that address resident concerns. The district casework that field deputies oversee ranges from helping residents install new crosswalks to enforcing conditional-use permits of local businesses. According to field deputies, those areas of the city where they have strong relationships with local neighborhood councils is also where they tend to receive frequent notifications about such issues. As one respondent said:

[Neighborhood councils] are on the ground, they are the first line of defense, and they're the ones who are like, "hey this is wrong. This has gone awry, we need your help." And that's usually where I will come in as back up if a city department official isn't getting back to them, I'll kind of nudge them. So 100% they are the enforcers and the first line of defense. (Interview with city council field deputy, 12/12/19)

The stocks of political capital in high-functioning neighborhood councils thereby allows them to effectively address and manage local land use and quality of life issues without having to deal with bureaucratic processes directly. Because field deputies and city administrators are more knowledgeable of administrative processes, it increases the likelihood that these requests are processed efficiently. In Los Feliz, for example, the assistance by city council field deputies allowed the neighborhood council to have new crosswalks both approved and installed on busy streets in the area.⁷ These political relationships discourage field deputies from engaging in "street-level bureaucracy," a concept that describes when civil servants simplify and limit their services to the public in order to decrease the demand for services and therefore better manage their roles and responsibilities (Lipsky, 1971).

Associational leverage

The associational leverage that high-functioning neighborhood councils utilize stems from the existence of other community organizations and associations, such as homeowners' associations

(HOAs), historic preservation overlays (HPOZs), and business improvement districts (BIDs), that neighborhood council board members either belong to or work directly with. As has been shown, connections between organization within one neighborhood are a strong predictor of policy influence (Lelieveldt et al., 2009). This study confirms that such connections, or associational leverage, allow neighborhood councils to better engage with community residents and build coalitions.

Oftentimes, these connections are utilized to demonstrate to decision-makers broad-based support for particular initiatives or land use issues. For example, one neighborhood council board member who is also a business owner and belongs to their local BID will organize the BID to support an initiative—such as a new median or traffic easement—that the neighborhood council is pursuing. In another instance, one neighborhood council member—who is also the president of their community's HOA explained that they will often share information with HOA members about upcoming public hearings for new developments in order to increase turnout of residents to provide public comment. According to one respondent, these associational networks may even lead to the creation of issue-based organizations that provide new opportunities to lobby the city:

In fact the people that are against the [new project] formed their own organization ... because they're wealthier homeowners and they understand the politics of what they want to do, it's much better to just to start a 501c3. They create these other avenues because it's easier with lawsuits, with things that they can do. Because you know the Neighborhood Council, we can't sue the city. (Interview with HHW neighborhood council board member 2/10/20)

In this sense, while the position of neighborhood council member provides one with formalized access to information about land use issues affecting the area, associational leverage allows these individuals to expand the sphere of influence beyond the formal avenues they are granted within the neighborhood governance system.

According to both city officials and developers, associational leverage plays an important role in shaping the outcomes of development projects. City council field deputies, for example, are required to not only liaise with neighborhood councils but also BIDs, HOAs, and other local organizations. According to one respondent, the associational leverage held by high-functioning neighborhood councils means that their office hears repeatedly from the same group of residents, albeit from different organizational contexts. And, these active individuals tend to be older and more affluent than the community at large:

They are just like, 'fix this problem and make it go away' ... and that is a lot of what I hear. I mean whether or not that is representative of everybody, that is also the hardest part. We probably hear from 25% of the people we actually represent. And because more people are tenants in our district and less and less people are single-family homeowners, it is harder to engage younger and lower income people. (Interview with city council field deputy, 11/20/2019)

By amplifying the voices of particular groups, associational leverage allows grassroots regimes to emerge that may dominate local decision-making processes.

However, associational leverage is not always utilized to benefit the wealthy few. For example, board members of several neighborhood councils in the study area collaborated to form a coalition aimed at assisting and advocating on behalf of those experiencing homelessness in the area. According to the founders, this has allowed them to not only provide key services—e.g., distribution of food, water, and feminine hygiene products—to those in need, but also build broader community support for a proposed transitional housing development that had faced opposition in other parts of the city. According to them, associational leverage is a necessary strategy to provide elected officials with the political coverage they need to request that the city exhaust more of its own resources on neighborhood-specific initiatives:

We've been asking for restroom facilities and showers for a couple years and it didn't happen, so we just had a pizza party fundraiser and raised enough money to hire our own shower truck. And only now has the city actually kicked in, after several months. The city started to kick in their shower truck that they are contracted with. So it is really interesting how, if they see residents doing something then they'll semi-support that. But

they won't actually start anything up themselves. (Interview with Los Feliz neighborhood council board members, 11/11/19)

Yet this also requires that those in leadership positions in neighborhood council structures have the ability to spend their time and resources on providing community services. While previous scholars have noted improved service-delivery is one of the primary benefits of neighborhood governance systems, it is worth noting the costs this places on resident volunteers. As one founder of the aforementioned coalition said, "We are essentially working two jobs, simultaneously ... this comes at a great expense to our personal lives" (interview with author 2019).

Discussion

Political capital, the willingness and preference to negotiate, and associational leverage are aspects of high-functioning neighborhood governance systems that allow them to influence local land use and policy decision-making. As this study shows, neighborhood councils wield influence through their repeated interactions with developers and city officials negotiating land use decisions. These interactions build stock of political capital, which allow neighborhood councils to exercise greater influence in citywide policy, pursuing socio-spatial agendas specific to their communities (Purcell, 1997). High-functioning neighborhood councils also have easy access to other neighborhood and civic organizations, allowing them to apply associational leverage as a tactic in influencing policy. While grassroots influence, and participation more generally, are heralded goals of participatory urban governance (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Chemerinsky & Kleiner, 2014; Coaffee & Healey, 2003; Jones, 1980; Jun & Musso, 2013), this study suggests that scholars further unpack what *kinds* of activities constitute participation, and what conditions allow for these activities to occur and endow them with influence. In other words, because the cases investigated in this study represent one end of the extreme, an important next step is to test the extent to which the patterns identified here persist in other neighborhood types. This paper therefore offers four propositions that may direct future study of this on the role and influence of neighborhood councils on shaping policy and the local quality of life.

High-functioning neighborhood councils are not the norm in neighborhood governance (Collins, *In press*). The two councils examined here are considerably more active than their counterparts across the city, and are also representing communities that are Whiter and more affluent than the average city resident. This study, therefore, illustrates the inherent limitations and inequities of neighborhood governance in general. The ability to build relationships with city officials and belong to and participate actively in multiple neighborhood associations is itself a function of economic security. The barriers to entry to high-functioning participatory governance are likely much higher for communities of renters and working-class families. As has already been shown, many neighborhood councils are characterized by having poor capacity and weak relationships with the city (J. Musso et al., 2004, 2007). It is in these communities that we can expect stocks of political capital to be lower.

Proposition 1: Stocks of political capital between city officials and neighborhood council board members are greater in neighborhoods comprised of residents that are more affluent and educated.

The second propositions interrogate the strength of political capital between neighborhood councilmembers and city officials. Previous research on social capital has argued that it is not simply the existence of a social network that makes social capital important, but how that network is appropriated by individuals to achieve particular outcomes (Sampson, 2012). In this study, neighborhood council members exhibited strong connections to city officials, and in turn city officials viewed these councils favorably. Rather than viewing development as an enemy to be combatted, these groups approach negotiations as an opportunity to minimize harm and extract community

benefits. In doing so, their role, while advisory, is seen by the city as a necessary step in the development process—one that can both improve land use outcomes for local residents and help developers establish rapport with city officials.

Whether neighborhood councils' use of other tactics successfully influences policy is worth exploring. Those tactics examined here requires neighborhood councils adhere to a form of "insider politics," such as legislative lobbying and public testimony. Such strategies are only an option for interest groups that both trust public officials and are confident in their ability to intervene in and shape policy processes (Gormley & Cymrot, 2006). Building trust between residents and public officials in neighborhoods where residents experience economic precarity may not be possible through modes of participatory urban governance insofar as residents perceive the urban planning process as inherently flawed and unjust. As previous studies on Los Angeles' neighborhood council system have shown, there are a significant number of councils that have weak relationships with the city (J. Musso et al., 2007), and this is particularly the case in low-income communities and communities of color facing gentrification and displacement. These communities may be more likely to see "outsider politics," which seek to expand the scope of conflict beyond decision-makers through protest and demonstration (Gormley & Cymrot, 2006), as their only option. To further test this, future research should compare neighborhood councils with and without stocks of political capital to examine to extent to which these connections, and the insider politics they engender, truly matter.

Proposition 2: Neighborhood councils with greater stocks of political capital are better able to influence city policymaking.

The presence of various civic organizations in a given neighborhood are a strong predictor of political participation in improving the local quality of life (Lelieveldt et al., 2009). The findings from this study reinforce this notion, and yet also raises the question as to whether the existence of a state-supported neighborhood council produces a marginal benefit. As shown here, members of high-functioning neighborhood councils tend to also belong to other local advocacy organizations, which results in associational leverage. With the City of Los Angeles exhausting significant resources on training and technical assistance to lower-functioning neighborhoods councils already, it is worth investigating as to whether the key determinant of neighborhood council success is the existence of other active civic organizations in the neighborhood that can allow councils to apply associational leverage to their advocacy goals. Alternatively, it is possible that some neighborhood councils may be able to apply associational leverage across neighborhoods by partnering with organizations outside their formal geography. To test this, future researchers should examine the relative density of civic organizations in different neighborhood council areas to determine if this has a strong relationship with council effectiveness.

Proposition 3: Neighborhood councils are more influential if their neighborhood is the site of numerous other civic and nonprofit organizations.

Conclusion

As many cities across the United States work to develop some form of neighborhood governance (Collins, *In press*), this study makes several important contributions to scholarly and practitioner conversations around participatory urban governance. With the most expansive and established system of neighborhood governance in the country, Los Angeles is oft-cited by other cities as a shining example of neighborhood governance par excellence (Collins, *In press*). This paper cautions us against such lofty conclusions. Both normative and empirical discussions of participatory urban governance must consider the possibility that expanding participation for participation's sake may not increase the pie for everyone, but rather increase the appetite of a select few. While scholars have devoted much attention to questions of how neighborhood governance systems are structured and administered in order to ensure they are both effective and equitable, the findings reported here indicate that successful neighborhood governance is perhaps tied

more directly to the sociopolitical dimensions of urbanism articulated in theories of regime politics (Stone, 1989). And although often heralded as a form of participatory governance that will improve democracy (Parlow, 2008), this study suggests that the creation of neighborhood governance systems instead represents an expansion and consolidation of urban regimes between city officials and urban elites (Purcell, 1997). The political capital and associational leverage held by high functioning neighborhood councils point to cross-sectoral coalitions and partnerships that bridge public institutions and community interests. Their willingness and preference to negotiate illustrate a desire to create a positive sum game within the polity. Because these partnerships are also constructed with city administrators who are not prone to term limits, they are also likely to persist over time as city leadership changes. These are all fundamental characteristics of an urban regime (Dowding et al., 1999; Mossberger & Stoker, 2001).

Insofar as high-functioning neighborhood councils represent a blossoming urban regime, we should further scrutinize the justifications for establishing formalized systems of participatory urban governance. Whereas many scholars have advocated neighborhood governance as a way to improve equity by expanding participation, greater participation also leads to more avenues through which political and policy entrepreneurs can expand their sphere of influence in shaping land use outcomes. This kind of civic participation requires that citizens have significant time and resources to dedicate, and thus does not necessitate greater equity. Despite investments by the City of Los Angeles in technical capacity building to help improve struggling neighborhood councils, the gap persists between those that are low functioning and high functioning. More importantly, it is possible that some characteristics of high functioning neighborhood councils identified by this study are tied to socioeconomics, and thus cannot simply grow out of civic education, such as those trainings offered the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerments. Closing the gap will therefore require broader and deeper policy changes that lead to economic security—such as offering a living wage and displacement protections—in communities with low functioning neighborhood councils. And as mentioned, it may be that council success is tied to the existence of other active civic organizations in the neighborhood.

This study is limited by several factors. As a study of extreme cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), its findings are not generalizable to the wider population of neighborhood councils that are not high-functioning. Additional work must be done in comparing the influence of neighborhood councils at different scales of functionality. Second, the enormous size, diversity, and administrative complexity of the City of Los Angeles limit the generalizability of these findings on other cities, and other countries. For example, neighborhood governance structures in smaller U.S. cities or in Europe may be able to shape land use outcomes without necessarily drawing from political capital and associational leverage. Future scholars might consider comparative studies across cities that explore what makes neighborhood councils “high-functioning” across different systems. The four theoretical propositions discussed here may guide these research trajectories.

Notes

1. See: About Neighborhood Councils. (2020, May 21). Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://empowerla.org/about-neighborhood-councils/>.
2. The only communities not included are the Pacific Palisades and Brentwood, which have formed informal “Community Councils” but opted to stay outside of the official neighborhood councils system.
3. “City official” is defined broadly to include a variety of civil servants, including city council staff, public administrators, police officers, and city attorneys.
4. Because developers are often accompanied or represented by land use entitlement consultants throughout the development approval process, interviews with developers included both actual real-estate developers and their consultants.
5. Neighborhood councils may establish a variety of issue-based committees that make recommendations to the full council, Examples include planning and land use, public safety, and transportation, among others.
6. See here: http://davidryu.lacity.org/press_release_party_house_ordinance_goes_into_effect.
7. See here <https://www.losfelizledger.com/article/neighborhood-council-requests-more-los-feliz-crosswalks/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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