

When Local Initiative Works: Social Capital, Civic Virtue, and the Paths of Two Pennsylvania Communities

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Two Animating Questions

Why is it that some places are able to make policy that works at the local level and others are not?

What is the “secret sauce” in how successful local communities are built?

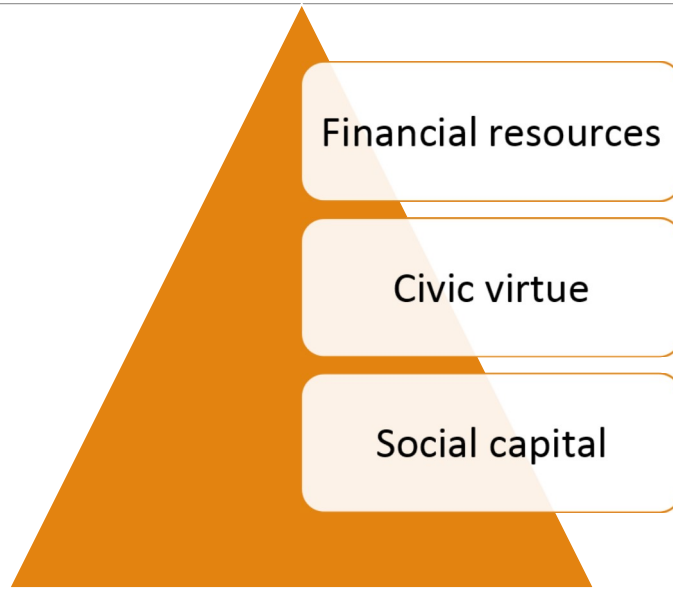
What I did

- Grant to spend the summer of 2019 reading existing literature and conduct preliminary interviews
- Interviewed 20 civic leaders (13 primarily based in Lancaster and 7 in Harrisburg)
 - Government officials
 - Non-profit executives
 - Business owners involved in public policy
 - Journalists
- Developed a statistical model to predict where social capital develops
- Wrote a thesis about it

Demographic & Descriptive Data of Interviewees		
	Lancaster	Harrisburg
Total Interviews	13	7
Men / Women	9 / 4	5 / 2
People of Color	2	3
Government Officials	4*	4^
Non-Profit/Civic Leaders	6*	2^
Journalists	2	2
Business Officials	2	1

* One Lancaster interviewee has recently served as both a government official and a non-profit/civic leader
^ One Harrisburg interviewee, in addition to having a "day job" in another discrete category, runs a substantial non-profit civic organization and recently left a position in government

Basic Theory



Working definitions

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Shared values and norms of a community that enable coordinated action towards the community's objectives

Neutral resource (i.e. can be used for "good or evil")

CIVIC VIRTUE

Rooted in civic equality

Cultivates sense of belonging

Orients community towards taking altruistic action



Where does social capital come from anyway?

Distinct from economics

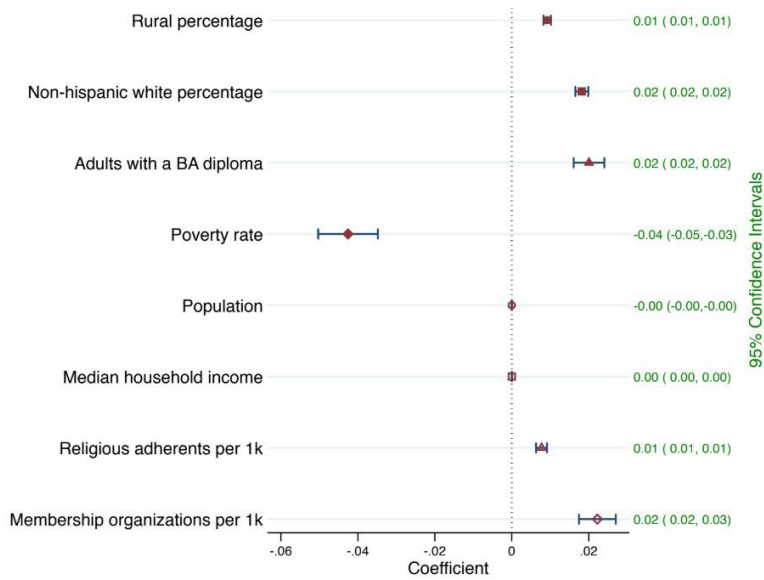
Distinct from education

Distinct from religion

Distinct from race

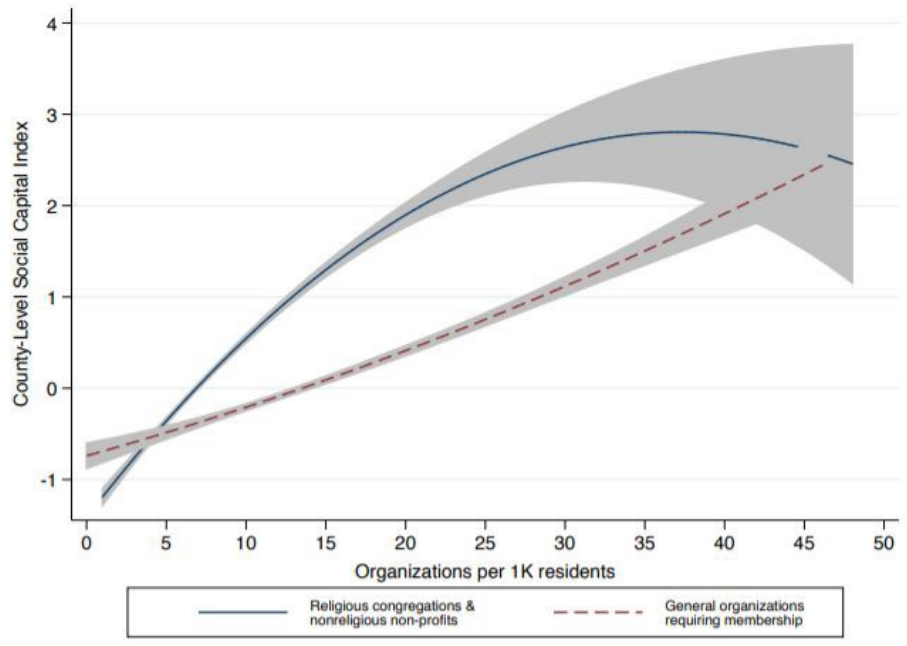
Institutional density matters

“Traditional sociological measurements” matter to a degree



Collective Efficacy Research

- Concentrated poverty *does* decrease likelihood that residents will act on local problems, but not dramatically so
- Strength of local nonprofit organizations – built by citizens – is strongest predictor of this collective efficacy (Sampson study in Chicago)



Comparative Analysis

LANCASTER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA



DAUPHIN COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA



Themes from Interviews

LANCASTER

Sense of shared vision among community leaders

Rising tide lifts all boats

Collaboration

Grassroots activity in neighborhoods (SoWe project)



HARRISBURG

Serious fiscal distress

Territorialism / limited collaboration

Civic pride

Growing institutional comity

Increasing number of "third places"



A drive to “get things done”

“I think about my role of mayor in two ways. One is a very hemmed in by state law in terms of what we can and cannot do as a class three city in Pennsylvania. And the other way that I think about it is that at the end of the day, people elected me to get it done. And whatever it is, there's an expectation that we do whatever we can and think out of the box to solve problems. And while there is this tension that exists between being hemmed in and pushing the envelope. We very much try to push the envelope.”

– Danene Sorace, Mayor of Lancaster

“You've got to have two things: people and money. I don't get involved in plans ... Because I've been involved in the past, as you just said, getting people to get involved, plan, all the stuff like that. Raise expectations, raising anticipation, and then say to them, ‘oh, by the way, we can't really do that.’ People get cynical, and you can't really blame them.”

– Jim Shultz, Former Director of the SoWe project



Institutional constraints matter

“The police and the fire budget together is more money than we get in property taxes. Just for police and fire. So how are we supposed to cut our way into something? ... I think there's maybe a misperception as well that you can somehow, like in Lancaster or elsewhere, that economic development is the key, that you can grow your way out of these sort of fundamental dynamics. And that's not the case.”

– Eric Papenfuse, Mayor of Harrisburg



What have we learned?

Among Pennsylvania localities, Lancaster is the exception, not the rule

Institutional environment matters

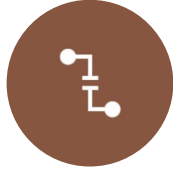
Social capital is key to overcoming collective action problems

Social capital gets built from the bottom-up (policy entrepreneurs)

Why should we care?



ANTIDOTE TO
POLARIZATION



BYPASS FEDERAL- AND
STATE-LEVEL
GRIDLOCK



FOSTER CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT



ENHANCE
DEMOCRATIC
LEGITIMACY



Very condensed bibliography/further reading list

Olson: *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965)

Putnam: *Making Democracy Work* (1993) and *Bowling Alone* (2000)

Katz and Nowak: *The New Localism* (2018)

Carney: *Alienated America* (2019)

Fallows and Fallows: *Our Towns* (2018)

Levin: *A Time to Build* (2020)

