# FACTORS AFFECTING VOTER REACTIONS TO GOVERNMENTAL REORGANIZATION IN METROPOLITAN AREAS

Summary of Report M-15



ADVISORY COMMISSION ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

### ADVISORY COMMISSION ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS (As of May 1962)

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Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

#### PREFACE

Pursuant to its statutory authority, the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations has the duty, among others, to "encourage discussion and study at an early stage of emerging public problems that are likely to require intergovernmental cooperation."

One such study relates to the structure of local government in metropolitan areas and means for its adaption to meet new conditions. The present report makes no recommendations. Its principal purpose is to provide information. This is a summary of a report that was approved for publication at a meeting of the Commission on May 4-5, 1962.

Frank Bane Chairman

#### 1. FINDINGS

From 1950 through 1961, proposals for significant change in local government structure were subjected to popular referendum in 18 of the Nation's 212 standard metropolitan areas. 1/ Eight of the surveyed 18 plans passed the referendum hurdle, while 10 others failed at adoption at the polls, including two which received a favorable majority vote but did not meet legal requirements for approval by various component portions of the total areas involved.

These 18 reorganization plans reflect a considerable variety of approaches and may be grouped rather broadly. There are seven of these, however, which seemed to have had the greatest impact upon the governments in their area, in that each of them contemplated the consolidation of two previously independent governments, substituting a single governing body therefor. These seven proposals involved Albuquerque-Bernalillo County, New Mexico; Durham-Durham County, North Carolina; Knoxville-Knox County, Tennessee; Macon-Bibb County, Georgia; Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee; Newport News-Warwick County, Virginia; and Richmond-Henrico County, Virginia.

Of these seven "drastic" proposals, only that involving Newport News-Warwick was adopted, although the Richmond-Henrico County proposal received a favorable reception in terms of total areawide vote. (The Nashville-Davidson County proposal was later adopted at another referendum and is now also in effect.)

At the other extreme were five plans which involved no impairment of the power and autonomy of existing local governments, only charter proposals which called for changes in the structure but not the power of particular county governments (Lucas County, Ohio; and Oneida and Onondaga Counties in New York), plus a proposal for a Denver Metropolitan Capital Improvements District which would have authority to impose a four-county sales tax for financing public improvements. Of these, all but the Lucas County charter proposal passed.

Between these two groups of proposals, in severity of impact, were six propositions which would not have eliminated any existing units of government but would have reduced the range of authority of some existing governments with regard to certain functions. In Seattle and St. Louis, this resulted from the eventual establishment of a new special

<sup>1/</sup> See Table 1, Appendix A, for reorganization efforts studies and their outcome.

district government, while in the other four areas (Atlanta, Cuyahoga County, Louisville, and Miami), functional adjustments between county and municipal governments were contemplated.

Of these, three--Atlanta, Miami, and Seattle--were adopted.

Each of these 18 reorganization efforts was pursuant to some authorization granted by State constitutional or statutory provisions. Some of these had potentially statewide application (for example, the Ohio and New York provisions for new county charters). With but one possible exception, all of the authorizing State provisions under which structural change was attempted has either been enacted or materially amended since 1950. As a minimum, this would suggest the importance of having appropriate legal authority for efforts at local governmental reorganization.

#### The Issues Involved

In nearly every instance, the proponents of reorganization are reported to have focused strongly on two topics—the faultiness of existing local government structure or operations, and the need for urban-type services in outlying areas. The latter issue often specially involved particular functions, most commonly sewers and water supply, but with fire protection, rural zoning, police protection, and traffic control also mentioned. Financial implications are reported as important "pro-reorganization" factors for 10 of the 18 areas, with emphasis in some instances upon areawide totals of local government costs or taxes, and in other instances upon the geographic allocation of governmental costs. Few other main issues are reported on the "pro-reorganization" side for more than one or two areas.

Opposition to reorganization proposals also concentrated heavily on a few key points. Financial implications are cited as an important basis for "anti" arguments in all but two of the 18 areas, with concern for geographic allocation of costs at least partly involved in most instances. In two-thirds of the 18 areas, opponents urged that the proposal was "too drastic or too sweeping." (Interestingly, this charge was encountered by most of the modest-effect county charters as well as by the other more drastic reorganization plans.) In about half of the 18 areas, observers considered that the prospective effect of reorganization upon local government employees or present elective officials was a major opposition factor. In five instances, the possible implication of the reorganization proposal for a colored racial minority concentrated mainly in the central city is cited as an important negative factor. at least two or three areas, opponents argued against the particular plan proposed on the grounds that some particular alternative approach would be a better way to meet the local situation.

The importance of independence for small communities in the area did not seem to be a universal issue. Observers reported this as a major issue against the reorganization plan in only 7 of the 18 areas.

#### The Role of Various Community Interests

Following is a summary of the observations reported concerning 38 community interest groups.

<u>Interest</u> in reorganization proposals may be roughly gauged by the number of areas where community groups reportedly had <u>any</u> kind of role or attitude. As would be expected, "metropolitan newspapers" showed interest in every instance. Widespread "interest" was also reported for the following:

Central city officials
County officials
Leagues of Women Voters
Suburban newspapers
Central city commercial interests
Suburban commercial interests
Central city Chambers of Commerce
Central city real estate interests

At the other extreme, only limited or scattered evidence of interest was reported for:

Parent-Teacher Associations Church groups or leaders State political leaders Government suppliers

Others of the 38 fall between these two extremes in frequency of mention. Surprisingly near the bottom of the range, being reported for only 6 to 8 of the 18 areas, are the following:

Central city neighborhood improvement groups Suburban neighborhood improvement groups Taxpayer groups Civic research agencies Suburban Chambers of Commerce Employees of fringe local governments The <u>activity</u> of various community interests with regard to these reorganization efforts can also be roughly gauged from observers' reports. For 16 of the 18 areas, metropolitan newspapers appear as "A leading, active, united element <u>for</u> the plan." A similar role is indicated for the Leagues of Women Voters in 11 of the 18 areas, and for the central city Chambers of Commerce in 8 of the 18 areas. Also cited as leading reorganization proponents in 5 or 6 areas each are the following:

Central city commercial interests Radio and TV stations Civic research agencies Banks Central city officials

Active leadership of the opposition to the reorganization efforts was relatively scattered. Only two community elements, suburban newspapers and county government employees, were classed as "a leading, active, united element <u>against</u> the plan."

Returning to the <u>attitude</u> or <u>position</u> of various community elements toward local government reorganization in metropolitan areas, these are likely to depend upon the kind of change being proposed, and certain groups found in opposition in some areas were reported backing the changes proposed in other areas. Therefore, a composite index to measure the "typical" position of various community elements, based on the intensity and unanimity of their attitudes and the number of areas where they played some role, was developed and is summarized as follows:

Metropolitan newspapers
Leagues of Women Voters
Central city Chambers of Commerce
Central city commercial interests
Central city real estate interests
Radio and TV stations
Banks
Central city officials
Academic groups or spokesmen
Manufacturing industry
Utilities
Civic research agencies
Central city homeowners

A smaller number of interests appear as having been commonly and strongly opposed to the reorganization proposal. In order of rank, beginning with the most commonly opposed element, they were:

Farmers
Rural homeowners
County government employees
Suburban newspapers
Employees of fringe local governments
Farm organizations
Officials of fringe local governments
Suburban commercial interests

The other 17 of the 38 ranged closely around the "zero" position, indicating considerable variation or splitting of attitude, or even inactivity or lack of interest.

No widespread, strong, consistent position appears, either for or against the proposals, by such potentially important interests as labor unions, taxpayer groups, neighborhood improvement groups, or minority racial elements.

Another major consideration was which community interests participated actively in the early stages of the reorganization effort, promoting or sharing in preliminary studies or in the development of the actual plan. Among those which did were the Leagues of Women Voters, central city officials, metropolitan newspapers, the Chambers of Commerce, county officials, and the Municipal Leagues or similar research groups, in that order.

#### Promotional Methods and Media

In most of the 18 areas, proponents of reorganization had the potential advantage of a "favorable" metropolitan press while opponents generally had the backing of suburban newspapers. Other media used for information and promotion in order of frequency of use in the 18 areas were: special meetings and forums, speakers bureaus, radio and TV, distribution of detailed educational materials, distribution of "promotional-type materials," development and use of ad hoc vote-seeking organizations, use of the ward/district organizations of either political party, labor union locals, Negro churches and/or social groups, spreading of cliches, slogans, or gross exaggerations, and rumor-spreading through the "grapevine." 2/

<sup>2/</sup> See Table 2, Appendix A.

The extent of use of cliches and rumor-mongering by opponents of reorganization was also noted. 3/

The foregoing seems to indicate:

Greater formal organization and use of "mass media" by the proponents of reorganization than by opponents;

Only a limited number of areas where either proponents or opponents managed extensive face-to-face promotional efforts;

Extensive use by anti-reorganization forces of slogans and rumors, as distinct from more formal and detailed argumentation.

Other findings indicate the crucial importance of a <u>localized</u>, effective effort by both sides to get out the vote:

A strong, localized get-out-the-vote effort by plan proponents was reported for six areas--Atlanta, Denver, Louisville, Newport News, Richmond, and Seattle. Four of these referendum efforts were successful, and the other two (Louisville and Richmond) received an overall majority though not the concurrent majorities required.

For the other four areas where reorganization proposals obtained a favorable majority vote (Miami, Erie, Oneida, and Onondaga), observers' comments indicate less intensive vote-getting efforts by proponents than in the six areas mentioned earlier. In each of these instances, however, the opposition effort was reportedly even less fully organized.

Of the eight areas where reorganization plans failed to receive a favorable majority, there were four (Durham, Macon, Nashville, and Lucas County, Ohio) where localized vote-getting efforts by the opposition were regarded by observers as being clearly more vigorous and widespread than those of the plan supporters.

In four other losing efforts, the evidence indicates that neither proponents or opponents mounted a vigorous vote-getting effort.

<sup>3/ &</sup>lt;u>Ibid</u>.

#### Influential Factors

All of the reorganization efforts studies had the benefit of concern, interest, and effort by some important community leaders and interests. Some of the other favorable factors observed were:

- 1. A sympathetic and cooperative attitude by State legislators.
- 2. The use of locally knowledgable individuals as staff to conduct background research and develop recommendations.
- 3. The conduct of extensive public hearings by the responsible group preparing the plan.
- 4. Careful concern in the design of the reorganization proposals, for problems involving representation of various districts and population elements.

Some of the unfavorable factors which probably were of telling influence in several areas were:

- 1. Absence of a critical situation to be remedied, or at least absence of a widespread recognition of such a situation.
- 2. Vagueness of specification as to some important aspects or implications of the reorganization proposals.
- 3. Active or covert opposition by some leading political figures in the area.
- 4. Discontinuity or lack of vigor in promotion of the reorganization proposal.
- 5. Popular suspicion of the substantial unanimity expressed for the proposal by metropolitan mass media (newspapers, TV, and radio).
- 6. Inability of the proponents to allay fears of the effect of the proposed reorganization upon local taxes.
- 7. Failure of the plan proponents to communicate broadly in a manner to reach relatively unsophisticated voters as well as others.

8. Failure by the proponents to anticipate and prepare for large scale opposition efforts in the referendum campaign.

#### 2. CONCLUSIONS AND INFERENCES

A number of generalizations with regard to problems of governmental reorganization in metropolitan areas seem to be justified by the record of the 18 areas which were reviewed.

# 1. <u>Proposals for governmental reorganization in metropolitan areas</u> have faced a largely apathetic public.

Typically, within the 18 areas studied, only one in four persons of voting age bothered to cast a vote on the reorganization proposal. In only two instances was there voting participation by as much as one-third of the adult population.

It is not suggested, of course, that an increased turnout at the polls would automatically assure adoption of any particular reorganization plan. In fact, the 18 efforts studies offer no clear evidence on this score.

However, a big turnout at the polls at least provides an opportunity to overcome relatively limited elements opposing change in the status quo; and whatever the outcome, the expression of the "consent of the governed" by a considerable fraction rather than by only a minor part of the electorate is likely to have clear advantages. If reorganization is thus authorized, the new arrangements start with a better chance of general community acceptance than if they could be "blamed" upon a limited, though active and effective, minority of the electorate. Furthermore, even though defeat of a particular proposal will generally leave unsolved the problems that led to its development, widespread popular participation in the action is more likely to "clear the air" and perhaps to suggest what alternative kinds of change might be more likely to obtain popular approval than if only a relatively small percentage of the electorate turned out for the referendum.

### 2. Reorganization efforts should not be undertaken lightly, but with full recognition of obstacles to their success.

One kind of problem has been widely noted--the difficulty of obtaining concurrence on desirable change from a majority of voters in various parts of the entire area concerned. The requirements of concurrent majorities have often been cited as a major barrier to local government reorganization.

It is frequently averred that proposals for local government reorganization in metropolitan areas are likely to carry in the central city but lose in the suburbs, giving rise to arguments against requirement for "concurrent majorities."

Of the 18 proposals surveyed, only 2 of the 10 which failed of adoption owed their defeat directly to the demand for concurrent majorities. Of the reorganization efforts adopted, there were two which depended only upon an areawide majority and would have lost if concurrent majorities within sub-areas had also been legally necessary. And there were two defeated plans which received a favorable majority in a central city but lost in outlying territory as well as in total. In the other 12 of the 18 reorganization efforts studies, pluralities ran parallel in the central and outlying parts of the area concerned, favorably in six instances and unfavorably in the other six. Altogether, this record suggests a somewhat less forbidding cleavage of public attitudes, geographically, than some discussions of metropolitan problems might suggest. Nonetheless, the common requirement for multiple majorities for adoption of a large area reorganization proposal must be recognized as a difficult hurdle to surmount.

But there is an even more troublesome problem which has not been widely emphasized. Any particular reorganization plan submitted to referendum is typically competing not only against the status quo but potentially also against alternative ways of dealing with the problems that give rise to the proposal. In several of the reorganization efforts surveyed, some of the most effective and telling opposition emphasized the different kind of structural adjustment. Perhaps in certain instances the preference expressed for "something else" is not entirely sincere, but the variety of problems commonly invoked in a restructuring of local government makes this a plausible basis for opposing any particular proposition.

Thus, the task of the would-be reorganizer is not merely to arouse public concern with existing conditions that are undesirable, or even to provide a convincing case that his particular plan would provide a reasonable remedy, but also to be prepared to demonstrate that his proposal is better than any available alternative.

#### 3. Any consequential local governmental reorganization in a metropolitan area will inevitably involve "political issues."

Even though some reorganizational proposal or approach may have overwhelming logic from the standpoint of equity or "economy and efficiency," it is folly to expect that it can avoid or readily withstand attacks from local interests whose positions in the community it may seem

to jeopardize. In fact, it is here that the outside advisor, regardless of how technically knowledgable he may be, faces his most serious limitations. A reorganization proposal must be sufficiently oriented to the political facts of life of a particular area that popular acceptability may be reasonably expected.

Examples of the various kinds of local political issues likely to be encountered are given below:

- 1. The status of individual elective officials and of other communities is likely to be involved.
- 2. Another difficult political problem is the size and nature of the constituences of members of the governing bodies, and for other elective officials. Some reorganization plans took explicit account of this situation and included provisions that were designed to safeguard the future representation interest of diverse sub-areas.
- 3. Numerous other groups or interests in the area-for example, local government employees, contractors, or suppliers—are likely to have some attachment to the existing arrangements which might be affected by the proposed change in the <u>status</u> quo.

Several of the organizational plans reviewed had certain provisions to minimize this prospective issue insofar as government personnel were concerned--for example, the explicit protection of their employment and retirement rights in the event of interagency or intergovernmental transfers. On the other hand, defeat of one or two of the proposals has been attributed to vigorous opposition of firms supplying certain types of urban services, such as refuse collection.

# 4. One condition for success in metropolitan reorganization is an intensive and deliberate effort to develop a broad consensus on the best attainable alternative to the status quo.

It is not to be expected that all elements of potential opposition to reorganization can be avoided or mollified. But it is important that there be an early, realistic, and hardheaded consideration of the implications of structural change for key groups and leaders in the area; that these implications enter into the choice among possible alternatives in the development of a particular reorganization proposal; and that the process by which a specific proposal is developed be such as to enlist the interest and expression of views by a diverse range of community elements.

At least three important purposes may be served by a deliberate effort, through hearings or otherwise, to enlist the views of potential opponents as well as probable supporters of metropolitan reorganization: this should provide further insight on the political feasibility of alternative kinds of structural change; it is likely to develop certain of the arguments that will arise in the subsequent referendum campaign on issues not subject to compromise or adjustment in the proposal as finally developed; and it may serve to win potential backing or at least neutrality from some individuals and groups that might otherwise be hostile through lack of information or through suspicion of the motives of the plan-preparing body.

# 5. Enlistment of popular support for governmental change in a metropolitan area calls for the use of a variety of promotional methods, suited to the diverse composition of the electorate.

This point sounds like a truism, but failure to take it adequately into account was apparently a major limiting factor in several of the reorganization efforts which have been reviewed. Findings which have been reported in detail about the referendum campaign in Nashville-Davidson County, Tennessee, resemble the impression one may gather for various other areas. In Davidson County, the reorganization plan was developed and promoted by individuals with a strong areawide identification--"cosmopolitans"--who did not manage to communicate effectively with a large part of the population.

A similar story might be told about the proponents of reorganization in other areas; overconfidence due to predominantly favorable press coverage; heavy reliance upon mass media of communications; little or no development of a precinct or neighborhood system for enlisting popular interest and backing; and only limited use of other face-to-face methods of recruiting voter support.

It is easy to see why these tendencies should exist. The problems of local government structure in a metropolitan area are complex and the design of feasible improvements is an arduous task which calls for analysis and judgment, rather than emotion. Individuals have the capacity and temperament to wrestle with such problems, and individuals who identify themselves with areawide rather than localized interests—i.e., those commonly in the forefront of efforts toward metropolitan reorganization—are unlikely also to comprehend the attitudes of many rank—and—file voters having a markedly different background and exposure. It is not reasonable to expect the initial instigators of "reform" to be skillful also in the strategy and tactics of enlisting broad—based popular support.

This suggests, in turn, how important it is for efforts at metro-politan reorganization to have the active participation of experienced politicians. Less generally than civic "amateurs" are such individuals likely to underestimate the need to summarize issues simply for many voters; to fall into the error of overconfidence; or to overlook the importance of localized and face-to-face methods of enlisting popular support.

#### APPENDIX A

#### Table 1

# Reorganizational Efforts Subject to Study in this Report and their Outcome

Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Consolidation, October 1959; Defeated

Atlanta-Fulton County "Plan of Improvement," June 1950; Adopted

Cuyahoga County, Ohio Home Rule Charter, November 1959; Defeated

Denver Metropolitan Capital Improvements District, September 1961; Adopted (Declared unconstitutional February 13, 1962)

Durham-Durham County - "Durham County Unified," January 1961; Defeated

Erie County (Buffalo) Home Rule Charter, November 1959; Adopted

Knoxville-Knox County Metropolitan Charter--Consolidation, April 1959;
Defeated

Lousiville, Kentucky, "Plan for Improvement," November 1956; Defeated

Lucas County (Toledo) Home Rule Charter, November 1959; Defeated

Macon-Bibb County Consolidation, June 1960; Defeated

Miami-Dade County Metropolitan Federation, May 1957; Adopted

Nashville-Davidson County Metropolitan Charter--Consolidation, June 1958; Defeated

Newport News-Warwick Consolidation, July 1957; Adopted

Oneida County (Utica) Home Rule Charter, November 1961; Adopted

Onondaga County (Syracuse) Home Rule Charter, November 1961; Adopted

Richmond City-Henrico County Merger, December 1961; Defeated

Saint Louis "Greater Saint Louis City-County District," November 1959; Defeated

Seattle Special Purpose District, 'Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle," September 1958; Adopted

Table 2
Promotional Methods and Media

Promotion method	On behalf of the proposal	Against the proposal
Special meetings and forums	16	6
Use of a "speakers' bureau"	15	7
Use of radio and TV	15	5
Distribution of detailed educational materials	11	
Distribution of promotional-type materials	10	4
Use of the ward/district organization of either political party	3	1
Communication through labor union locals	1	5
Communication through Negro churches and/or social groups	1	3
Repetition of cliches, slogans, gross exaggerations	2	16
Rumor-spreading ("grapevine") techniques		13
Development and use of an ad hoc vote-seeking organization	9	6

#### APPENDIX B

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