

2022

Extending Research of Neighborhood Governance Systems: An Empirical Study of Community Councils in Cincinnati, Ohio

Julie Cencula Olberding
Northern Kentucky University, olberdingj@nku.edu

Darrin Wilson
Northern Kentucky University

Stefanie Swiger
Northern Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/jep>



Part of the American Politics Commons, Other Political Science Commons, Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, Public Affairs Commons, and the Urban Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Olberding, Julie Cencula; Wilson, Darrin; and Swiger, Stefanie (2022) "Extending Research of Neighborhood Governance Systems: An Empirical Study of Community Councils in Cincinnati, Ohio," *The Journal of Economics and Politics*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59604/1046-2309.1047>

Available at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/jep/vol27/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Economics and Politics by an authorized editor of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact mchercourt@jcu.edu.

Systems of neighborhood governance have been developed in major cities across the United States and around the world as an organizational strategy to engage citizens more directly in local government. Scholarly articles on neighborhood governance systems – sometimes called “neighborhood councils,” “community councils,” and “citizen advisory councils” – have examined their formation, roles, activities, and effectiveness. The main purpose of our study is to extend the research on neighborhood governance systems by examining community councils in Cincinnati, Ohio. In particular, our study furthers the research by Li et al. (2019) of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles that addressed the question: What makes neighborhood associations effective in urban governance? These authors focused on relationships between the performance of governing boards and the effectiveness of neighborhood councils overall.

In Cincinnati, community councils are nonprofit organizations developed to strengthen connections between neighborhoods – specifically, the citizens living in them – and city government by enhancing communication, engagement, participation, and representation. According to the City of Cincinnati web site, “Community councils are a crucial link between the City and its many unique neighborhoods, and each council is as unique as the neighborhood it serves. These organizations ensure that neighborhood development responds to the needs and goals of its citizens. The councils are also a vehicle for communication and engagement throughout neighborhoods” (City of Cincinnati, n.d.). A more succinct description of a community council in this city is: “a group of volunteers chosen by residents to complete projects, engage with outside interests and interface with city government on issues that impact their communities” (Monks, 2021).

Our study explores community councils in Cincinnati more deeply, using the Li et al. (2019) multi-dimensional framework and methodology to analyze the relationship between

governing board performance and community council effectiveness. It represents one more step toward furthering our knowledge and understanding of neighborhood governance systems. This scholarly exploration seems to be as relevant and important now as it was 10 years ago, possibly for similar reasons. In their article on the “neighborhood council experience” in Los Angeles, Musso et al. (2011) wrote, “With faith in government waning, cultural diversity spiraling, and fiscal stress straining the ability of policy makers to address the policy challenges accompanying these developments, the salience of (re)connecting citizens with government takes on renewed urgency today. Nowhere is this more the case than in urban America ...” (p. 102).

Literature Review: Neighborhood Governance Systems

Formation and Development

In one of the early articles on neighborhood governance systems, Kathi and Cooper (2005) discuss the barriers to citizen participation in governance in metropolitan areas. Of course, governmental bodies in the United States operate in the context of a representative democracy, for which citizens elect representatives to act on their behalf on any number of issues. Kathi and Cooper (2005) assert that the diversity of citizens and the scope of issues make it more challenging for government bodies to accurately represent their needs, specifically in larger cities. Additionally, governments in the United States function in an administrative state; that is, once a law or policy is enacted, professional administrators are often tasked with decision-making and implementation to carry it out efficiently and effectively. “Under the ethos of the administrative state, the citizen was treated as a client or constituent. There was a minimalist approach to citizen participation” (Kathi & Cooper, 2005; p. 561).

In contrast to representative democracy, a deliberative democracy seeks to encourage citizens and government to work together in a collaborative fashion. One strategy to achieve deliberative democracy at the local level is to develop a neighborhood governance system, such as neighborhood councils or community councils. This approach seemed to gain popularity among city governments at the end of the 20th Century (Kathi & Cooper, 2005). For example, in 1974, the City of Raleigh created citizen advisory councils (CACs) with a mandate to work on three broad problems – housing, transportation, and governmental accountability. CACs were “designed to involve all areas of the City in a formal citizen participation structure ... whereby City government might use this avenue as one means of involving citizens in the decision-making process” (Holder, 2020). It should be noted that the Raleigh City Council voted to eliminate its CACs in 2020 because, as reported, some council members believed these entities did not represent residents well and they tended to resist new development (Holder, 2020; Levine, 2020). But supporters have argued that CACs have provided Raleigh residents with “valuable opportunities to share public information, defend against over-development, and engage diverse swaths of the community in municipal decision-making” (Holder, 2020).

In Los Angeles, voters adopted a city charter amendment in 1999 that developed a system of neighborhood councils designed “to decentralize the city’s planning, service delivery, and budget processes” (Kathi & Cooper, 2005; p. 563). The charter amendment, though, did not guarantee that neighborhood councils would be successfully formed in all communities in Los Angeles. Jun (2007) examined how various community contexts or factors impacted the formation of neighborhood councils, including community diversity, community preferences relative to the larger city, and community capacity such as existing organized groups and local branches of city organizations.

Neighborhood councils, community councils, and similar entities have been formed in other major cities in the United States including Atlanta, Honolulu, Oxnard, San Diego, Tacoma, and Washington, DC. In Canada, a system of “community leagues” exists in cities such as Edmonton and Quebec City. In fact, Edmonton adopted community leagues in 1917 to address social challenges due to rapid growth at the time, making it one of the first cities in the world with such a system (Sancton & Young, 2009). Beyond North America, there are additional neighborhood governance systems in Montevideo, Uruguay (Serdült & Welp, 2015), Tehran, Iran (Barati et al., 2012), and Shanghai, China (Chen et al., 2009).

Roles and Activities

Again, the overarching purpose of neighborhood governance systems, such as neighborhood councils and community councils, is to strengthen connections between citizens in these communities and the local government. “Urban governance establishes the conditions for citizens to channel their voices and participate in local policy issues. Neighborhood associations, which bridge the relationship between citizens and local government, are essential elements of neighborhood governance” (Li et al., 2019, p. 1). Within this purpose, neighborhood or community council members can discover and share information about city government policies, programs, and proposals with their communities. Information-sharing can happen via regularly-scheduled neighborhood or community council meetings, traditional newsletters, e-newsletters or group email messages, web sites, and social media.

In addition, these council members can communicate their neighborhood’s concerns, challenges, and ideas with city officials – both elected leaders and government administrators. In some cities, neighborhood governance systems provide advisory recommendations related to the comprehensive plan and/or various policies, programs, and services. Further, they may receive

funding from the city government for the development and management of neighborhood projects such as public parking areas, community gardens and green space, public murals and art, neighborhood parades and other events, and so on (City and County of Honolulu, 2021; City of Atlanta, n.d.; City of Cincinnati, 2021; City of Tacoma, 2020; DC.gov, n.d.; Kathi & Cooper, 2005; Musso et al., 2006).

According to Musso et al. (2006), the neighborhood council system in Los Angeles opens up the lines of communication and creates opportunities for collaboration with the city government in a few different ways. One way is creating more emotional attachment among neighbors to their community and to the other people living in it. This enables an environment where community members can form relationships and then rally their fellow citizens to issues that directly affect their neighborhood. Further, neighborhood councils can develop “bridging social capital,” which are “network relationships that connect groups and cross cleavages with respect to race, class, or political interest” (Musso et al., 2006; p. 85). Also, a neighborhood council system can broaden networks among these organizations, which leads to better dissemination of information; that is, information can be distributed outward to multiple neighborhood councils at once rather than simply “up and down.” Finally, neighborhood councils can create new ties with city council and create openness with city council members (Musso et al., 2006).

In another article, Musso et al. (2011) focused on the “neighborhood council experience” in Los Angeles, identifying lessons for practitioners and researchers about successful implementation, particularly in terms of enhancing participatory opportunities and building social capital in order to advance “strong democracy” (p. 102). One lesson is that participation in local government can be vulnerable because of the changing political climate; therefore, a

neighborhood council should be set up for the long term and be able to withstand any turnover in the city's leadership and administration (Musso et al., 2011). In addition, citizens and administrators come to the table with a different set of knowledge and attitudes. Thus, two-way capacity building is required to ensure both groups are on the same page; for citizens, their knowledge of government should be enhanced in a way that is not confusing or intimidating. Also, these researchers concluded that universities and foundations – due to their perceived neutrality – can support reforms in the area of neighborhood councils and citizen engagement.

Organizational Effectiveness

As mentioned earlier, Li et al. (2019) examined the organizational effectiveness of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles with a particular focus on the governing boards that lead and manage them. The authors developed a conceptual framework and hypotheses that emphasize the various constituents in urban governance who have different perspectives on neighborhood councils and their effectiveness. This multi-dimensional approach recognizes that neighborhood councils “do not work to deliver tangible goods and services but to facilitate democratic processes and connect citizens to the administrative system of the city” (Li et al., 2019, p. 3). Specifically, the authors assessed the degree to which the three aspects of governing board performance (internal capacity, attention-action congruence, external networking) are related to the three dimensions of neighborhood council effectiveness (promoting civic engagement, resolving neighborhood issues, advising about city policies). The following summarizes the governing board performance measures and the expected relationships with neighborhood council effectiveness (Li et al., 2019):

- Internal capacity involves various resources of the governing board including skills, time, effort, and money. The overarching hypothesis is that the governing board's internal capacity is positively associated with neighborhood council effectiveness.
- Attention-action congruence measures the governing board's stance on an issue relative to the action it takes to address that issue. Congruence is greater when a board identifies a potential problem in the community and then takes action by contacting the appropriate government agency. The hypothesis is that the governing board's attention-action congruence is positively associated with neighborhood council effectiveness.
- External networking represents board members using their existing connections and working to build new ones in service to their community. The hypothesis is that the governing board's external networking is positively associated with neighborhood council effectiveness.

Li et al. (2019) conducted a survey of neighborhood council board members to gather data related to these three hypotheses. Valid responses were collected from 80 different neighborhood councils, and most board members indicated that their neighborhood councils are moderately effective. In terms of the hypotheses, internal capacity was positively associated with all three dimensions of neighborhood council effectiveness – promoting civic engagement, resolving neighborhood issues, and advising about city policies. Attention-action congruence was positively associated with perceived effectiveness in terms of advising about city policies. Finally, external networking was positively associated with perceived effectiveness in terms of resolving neighborhood issues and advising about city policies (Li, et al., 2019).

Overall, this literature has enhanced our collective understanding of neighborhood governance systems, particularly neighborhood councils in Los Angeles. Using these studies as a foundation, we turn our attention to another neighborhood governance system in a different city – community councils in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Case Study: Community Councils in Cincinnati, Ohio

City of Cincinnati

The City of Cincinnati was settled in 1788 in southwestern Ohio, along the northern side of the Ohio River. It is considered to be the economic and cultural center of the Cincinnati metropolitan area, which is the largest area in Ohio and the 29th largest in the United States (Horn, 2018). More than 300,000 people live in the city proper while 2.2 million people live in the metropolitan area, which includes counties in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. The city has operated with a council-manager form of government since progressive reforms in the 1920s, and the council consists of nine members who are elected at-large rather than by wards or districts. More recently, the city government has evolved to become a more hybrid form due to city charter revisions that resulted in “a strong mayor” who can refer legislation to council, veto decisions by council, and recommend city manager hiring and firing to the council (Horn & Coolidge, 2021).

While most city departments interact with neighborhood and community groups on a regular basis, the Department of Community and Economic is specifically assigned the task of neighborhood development. The department operates the Neighborhood Support Program (NSP), which provides annual grants to community councils for leadership activities, communications, beautification, educational activities, and other needs (Invest in Neighborhoods, 2017b).

Additionally, the department operates the Neighborhood Enhancement Program, which is “a 90-day collaborative effort two between City departments, neighborhood residents, and community organizations” (City of Cincinnati, n.d.). The purpose of this program is to assist residents in two select neighborhoods each year with code enforcement, crime, neighborhood clean-up, and sustainable living.

Community Councils

For this initial study of community councils in Cincinnati, we discovered background information via city documents and web sites as well as reports by local organizations and media outlets. It is important to emphasize that Cincinnati community councils are not part of Cincinnati city government. “Community councils are nonprofit voluntary organizations that weigh in on city matters, but exist separately from the city government and follow different rules” (City of Cincinnati, *Cincinnati Community Council Boundaries*, 2022). At the time of this study, 48 community councils existed in Cincinnati. The official titles for many of these entities include the phrase “community council,” but some use a different phrase or word such as “neighborhood council,” “neighborhood association,” “residents council,” “town meeting,” “civic league,” “assembly,” or “forum” (Community Council Directory, n.d.).

Only one ordinance in the city of Cincinnati addresses community councils, according to a *Cincinnati Enquirer* article (Knight, 2017). Passed in 1989, the ordinance says community councils must be nonprofit organizations that follow nonprofit laws, such as not endorsing political candidates or ballot initiatives, and they cannot deny membership based on sex or race (Knight, 2017). In addition, the ordinance mentions that the city provides an annual stipend to each community council through the NSP and that residents in each neighborhood vote on how to spend the stipend. In recent years, the NSP stipend has been about \$7,000 per community

council, and it has been used for initiatives related to community safety, events, and beautification (Knight, 2017). As nonprofit organizations, community councils can apply for grants from foundations and other funders, and they can acquire charitable donations from individuals via their web sites, social media campaigns, special events, and other fundraising efforts. The city government recognizes only one community council per neighborhood, although there are other types of neighborhood-based organizations with different but related purposes including community development corporations (CDCs) and business district associations.

Invest in Neighborhoods (IIN) is another nonprofit organization in Cincinnati that is known as “the council of councils.” Its mission is to “empower community councils and their resident members, volunteers, and related community organizations to contribute to civic life and advance the quality of life in Cincinnati’s neighborhoods, by increasing capacities and competencies, assisting with resources, and promoting civic engagement” (Invest in Neighborhoods, 2017a). IIN furthers this mission through programs aimed at technical assistance, leadership development, and resource development. In addition, the organization also manages and hosts the Neighborhood Councils Action Coalition, which promotes collective action across the neighborhoods, particularly around the city’s legislative and administrative processes that impact neighborhoods (Invest in Neighborhoods, 2017c). The coalition holds meetings once a week, which are open to community council board members and committee chairs.

Sample and Data

In developing and implementing our study, we partnered with IIN since it convenes and works with community councils. We began by developing an online survey instrument based on

the Li et al. article (2019). We piloted the online survey with IIN board members, many of whom currently serve on the governing boards of various community councils or have served on them in the past. While we used Li et al.'s survey instrument as a guide, we recognize there was a limitation to it, which needs to be recognized. The survey captures both independent and dependent variables. An alternative method would have been to collect dependent variables from sources other than the board member survey, such as data on NSP funding and building permits. However, these data are not consistently organized at the neighborhood level and/or shared by the City of Cincinnati or other sources.

We followed Dillman's "gold standard" for survey implementation: pre notification, notification, and post notification. IIN staff sent these messages to their list, which at the time consisted of 187 governing board members of community councils. During this time, we were scheduled to participate in the Cincinnati Neighborhood Summit, organized by IIN, in March 2020. Most board members attend this one-day annual event, so we had planned to present preliminary results and collect additional survey responses via laptops computers and paper-and-pencil surveys. The 2020 Neighborhood Summit was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but eventually most of the sessions were implemented in an online format during the remainder of 2020, including our session.

In the end, 82 board members representing 28 community councils completed the online survey. But some responded only to the few initial items on the survey, so we removed them from the dataset. The final count was 72 respondents, so the response rate was 38.5% (i.e., 72 of 187 board members). Further, the respondents represented 58.3% of community councils (i.e., 28 of 48 councils).

Demographic data were collected from the respondents. Based on this data, the majority of respondents to this survey lived in their neighborhood for at least ten years, owned their home, were at least 50 years of age, white, non-Hispanic, female, had at least a bachelor's degree, were employed, and had a household income of at least \$80,000. Our respondents were very similar demographically to the respondents in Li, et.al (2019), with the exception that our respondents were predominately female. Additionally, the demographics of the majority of our respondents are similar to the demographics of nonprofit board members nationwide; that is, our respondents do not represent the diversity of the communities they serve, which is a microcosm of the broader nonprofit sector. "Diversity on nonprofit boards falls short of reflecting the overall diversity of the United States" (Osili, et.al., 2018, p. 6).

Measures

The dependent variables in this study are designed to measure perceived effectiveness of community councils overall. We examined effectiveness according to the three dimensions identified by Li et al. (2019): promoting civic engagement, resolving community issues, and advising about city policies. We asked respondents about their community council's effectiveness in these areas over the past year using a 5-point Likert scale. The 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1="Not Effective at All" to 5="Extremely Effective".

Following Li, et.al. (2019), we categorized seven survey items into the three dimensions of community council effectiveness. Promoting civic engagement consisted of three items: (1) *enhancing the sense of community or "togetherness" in the neighborhood*, (2) *improving the sense of pride in the neighborhood*, and (3) *including diverse interests in the neighborhood*. Resolving community issues had one item, *working to address the needs and problems in the*

neighborhood. Finally, advising about city policies included: (1) *advising city on land use*, (2) *advising the city on local service needs*, and (3) *advising the city on citywide policies*.

The first independent variable, internal capacity, was measured by taking the average score from a 5-point Likert scale, 1=“Strongly Disagree” to 5=“Strongly Agree”, on how well respondents felt their community council board was able to: (1) *define goals clearly*, (2) *run meetings smoothly*, (3) *form consensus effectively*, (4) *manage conflict constructively*, (5) *maintain leadership stability*, (6) *recruit and manage volunteers effectively*, (7) *acquire grants and other funds as needed to support programs and activities*, (8) *manage financial resources effectively in terms of budgeting, accounting, and reporting*, (9) *encourage questions and discussion at meetings*, and (10) *mediate difficult conversations*.

The second independent variable, attention-action congruence, is the average distance on a 5-point Likert scale between how often the governing board discussed particular issues and how often they have been in contact with the issue’s corresponding city government department. The issues examined were: (1) *crime, law enforcement, and public safety*, (2) *planning, zoning, and land use*, (3) *building permits, inspections, and enforcement*, (4) *development, redevelopment, and revitalization*, (5) *recreation centers, pools, and golf courses*, (6) *parks and greenspace*, (7) *streets, parking, sidewalks, and bike paths*, and (8) *garbage collection, yard-waste collection, snow removal, and street sweeping*. This classification is intended to be broad, as each neighborhood may face issues specific to its community and/or issues similar to other neighborhoods. Additionally, this classification captures the frequency of specific issues as well as the frequency a broad topic is discussed. The corresponding city departments were: (1) *Cincinnati Police Department*, (2) *City Planning*, (3) *Buildings and Inspection*, (4) *Department of Community and Economic Development*, (5) *Cincinnati Recreation Commission and/or a*

recreation center, (6) Cincinnati Parks, (7) Department of Transportation and Engineering, and (8) Department of Public Services. The 5-point Likert scale was from, 1="Never" to 5="Always".

The third independent variable, external networking, is based on how often the governing board has been in contact with individuals or organizations external to the community council. The options were: (1) *Mayor of Cincinnati and/or his staff*, (2) *One or more Cincinnati City Council members and/or their staff*, (3) *City Manager and/or direct staff in his office*, (4) *City administrators or employees other than the City Manager (e.g. city planners, police officers, park officials)*, (5) *Invest in Neighborhoods board members or staff*, and (6) *Other community organizations (e.g. schools, libraries, development corporations, local businesses, other community councils)*. A 5-point Likert scale was used: 1="0 times (no contact)", 2="1-2 times", 3="3-4 times", 4="5-6 times", and 5="More than 6 times". We averaged the scores for all options to use as the external networking variable.

There are two control variables, years of governing board membership and size of governing board. Unlike Li, et.al. (2019), we chose to use the respondent's length of service on the governing board, but with the same rationale. As individuals spend more years of service to the board, they are likely to gain more experience, through networking with stakeholders and learning more about board governance (Chambre & Fatt, 2002). Additionally, there are situations where community councils operate for many years, then become dormant, and later are re-established by newer residents and/or older residents. Thus, it is not always possible to know the exact number of years that some councils were in existence. Years of board membership was coded based on how many years of service: 1="4 years or less", 2="5-9 years", 3="10-14 years", 4="15-19 years", and 5="20 years or more". The second control variable, size of board, was used

to account for how many people served on the governing board. The assumption is larger boards will have more connections to stakeholders and resources to help the board be more effective (McPherson, 1983; Newton, 1982). Unlike the other control variable, years of board service was not coded.

We used a hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to analyze community council effectiveness. The control variables were entered in the first step and the independent variables entered during the second, for all three regression models. In order to avoid problems with heteroscedasticity, standard errors were weighted in the three models. Additionally, to test for common source bias, dependent and independent variables obtained through the same survey, we performed Harman's single factor test (Harman, 1976). The estimated variance for the three models were 30.97%, 30.39%, and 28.033%, all below the 50% threshold, indicating no common source bias.

Findings

According to the descriptive statistics, shown in Table 1, the dependent variables promoting civic engagement, resolving community issues, and advising about city policies, had means of 3.25, 3.49, and 2.90 respectively. This suggests that respondents, on average, felt their community councils are relatively effective in promoting civic engagement and resolving issues. However, respondents indicated that their community councils are less effective with regard to advising about city policies relative to the two other dimensions of community council effectiveness.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Promoting Civic Engagement	3.25	0.92	1	5
Effective Togetherness	3.61	1.051	1	5
Effective Pride	3.33	1.075	1	5
Effective Diverse Interests	3.20	1.05	1	5
Resolving Community Issues	3.49	0.92	1	5
Advising City Policy	2.90	0.94	1	5
Effective Land Use	2.83	1.095	1	5
Effective Services	3.14	0.997	1	5
Effective City-Wide	2.69	1.071	1	5

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for the survey items underlying the independent variable known as internal capacity. This variable had a mean of 3.87, suggesting that respondents felt the internal capacity of their boards was relatively high. The highest scores on the individual items were on the board’s ability to encourage participation at meetings, manage finances, and maintain leadership stability. While still above average, recruiting and managing volunteers, acquiring funds, and setting clear organizational goals had the lowest scores.

Table 2**Descriptive Statistics for Internal Capacity (Independent Variable)**

Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Internal Capacity	3.87	0.770	1.3	5
Board Goals	3.63	0.941	1	5
Board Meetings	4.03	0.934	1	5
Board Consensus	4.00	0.872	1	5
Board Conflict	3.78	0.996	1	5
Board Leadership	4.10	0.996	1	5
Board Volunteers	3.28	1.103	1	5
Board Funds	3.56	0.977	1	5
Board Financial Management	4.14	0.939	1	5
Board Participation	4.93	0.865	1	5
Board Mediation	3.78	1.051	1	5

The second independent variable, known as attention-action congruence, measures the overall difference between the frequency of a governing board discussing a community issue and the frequency of them contacting the relevant city department. As Table 3 indicates, the overall mean of attention-action congruence was 0.80 within a range of 0 to 4. This statistic suggests that there was high association between issue discussion and action taken. Across all community councils, the issues most frequently discussed were crime, community events, and development, while the most frequent departments contacted were police, recreation, and planning.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Attention-Action Congruence (Independent Variable)

Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Attention-Action Congruence	0.80	0.470	0.25	2.88
Discussed Crime	4.58	0.801	2	5
Discussed Planning	3.49	0.984	1	5
Discussed Permits	3.04	0.901	1	5
Discussed Development	3.82	0.793	2	5
Discussed Recreation	3.31	1.171	1	5
Discussed Parks	3.34	0.999	1	5
Discussed Streets	3.61	0.897	2	5
Discussed Waste	2.59	0.904	1	5
Discussed Events	4.36	0.756	2	5
Discussed Youth	3.39	1.140	1	5
Contacted Police	4.36	0.869	2	5
Contacted Planning	3.35	0.896	1	5
Contacted Buildings	2.93	0.937	1	5
Contacted Development	3.07	0.900	1	5
Contacted Recreation	3.73	1.171	1	5
Contacted Parks	3.01	1.127	1	5
Contacted Transportation	3.30	0.991	1	5
Contacted Public Services	2.87	0.844	1	5

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the survey items underlying the third independent variable known as external networking. The overall mean of 2.81 indicates that community councils were relatively weak in networking with external stakeholders, on the whole. Community councils rarely contacted the Mayor (or staff) or the City Manager (or staff). However, councils contacted government departments and other organizations beyond the ones listed more frequently.

Table 4**Descriptive Statistics for External Networking (Independent Variable)**

Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
External Networking	2.81	0.79	1.5	4.67
Contacted Mayor	1.94	0.873	1	4
Contacted Council	2.96	1.194	1	5
Contacted Manager	1.93	0.944	1	5
Contacted Administration	3.55	1.301	1	5
Contacted IIN	2.88	1.299	1	5
Contacted Other	3.61	1.251	2	5

The average years of board membership was very low with a mean of 1.62, between less than 4 years of service and 5 to 9 years of service (see Table 5). The size of board membership ranged from 4 members to 17 members, with an average of slightly larger than 10.

Table 5**Descriptive Statistics for Board Characteristics**

Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Years of Board Membership	1.62	0.90	1	5
Size of Board	10.23	3.43	4	17

Table 6 shows the correlations between the model's variables. Similar to the findings of Li, et.al. (2019), the three dependent variables of community council effectiveness were correlated to one another at 0.77, 0.66, and 0.57 respectively. The statistically significant correlations between the dimensions of community council effectiveness suggest that the dimensions are accounting for different aspects of organizational effectiveness. As for the independent variables, there were very few strong correlations.

Table 6
Correlation Table

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Promoting Civic Engagement	1								
2. Resolving Community Issues	0.770*	1							
3. Advising City Policy	0.664*	0.565*	1						
4. Internal Capacity	0.792*	0.740*	0.463*	1					
5. Attention-Action Congruence	0.061	0.097	0.030	0.066	1				
6. External Networking	0.233	0.227	0.294*	0.229	0.065	1			
7. Years of Board Membership	-0.083	-0.016	-0.167	0.061	-0.095	-0.054	0.017	1	
8. Size of Board	-0.072	0.039	-0.045	-0.076	-0.074	0.024	-0.072	0.207	1

* $p < .05$

Three regression models were run, each using one of the three dependent variables measuring the community council's effectiveness: promoting civic engagement, resolving community issues, and advising about city policies (Table 7). The first model – with the dependent variable of promoting civic engagement – had an R^2 of 0.665 and was statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level. The only independent variable with a statistically significant relationship with civic engagement was internal capacity ($\beta = 0.89$, $p < .001$). This suggests a community council board's leadership and management abilities – such as forming consensus, running meetings, and encouraging participation – are very important to the community council's effectiveness in promoting civic engagement. As a reminder, promoting civic engagement consists of three underlying items: enhancing sense of community or “togetherness”; improving sense of pride; and including diverse interests.

Table 7
Regression Results

	Promoting Civic Engagement	Responding to Community Needs	Advising City on Policy
Internal Capacity	0.888*** (0.104)	0.787*** (0.097)	0.546*** (0.140)
Attention-Action Congruence	-0.085 (0.128)	0.094 (0.132)	-0.051 (0.277)
External Networking	0.095 (0.093)	0.064 (0.103)	0.221 (0.134)
Years of Board Membership	-0.120 (0.085)	-0.049 (0.088)	-0.188 (0.100)
Size of Board	-0.01 (0.023)	0.040 (0.024)	0.030 (0.032)
Constant	-0.113 (0.538)	-0.144 (0.543)	0.203 (0.773)
R^2	0.665	0.648	0.344
F statistic	19.217***	17.793***	5.061***

Note. Standard errors in parentheses

* $p > .05$, ** $p > .01$, *** $p > .001$.

The second regression model – with the dependent variable of resolving community issues – had an R^2 of 0.648 and was statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level. As with the first model, the only independent variable with a statistically significant relationship with resolving community issues was internal capacity ($\beta = 0.79$, $p < .001$).

The third regression remodel – with the dependent variable of advising about city policies – had an R^2 of 0.344. Of course, this is a lower explanatory power than the other two models, but it was statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level. Once again, the only independent variable statistically significant was internal capacity ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < .001$). This highlights the importance of building the internal capacity of a governing board to increase the likelihood of organizational effectiveness overall. Not denoted in the regression output table was the statistical significance of years of board membership at the $p < .10$ level. The negative relationship between the two variables indicates that the longer someone serves on a governing board, the less effective they see the community council in advising about city policies.

Discussion and Conclusion

During the past 15 years or so, a body of research has been forming around the phenomenon of neighborhood governance systems. Most scholarly articles have looked at their formation, roles, and activities while a few studies have begun to examine outcomes and effectiveness. As mentioned, many studies have focused on the neighborhood council system in Los Angeles, partly because key scholars in this research area are based at the University of Southern California. But research has been emerging of additional cities in the United States and

other countries. Our study extends this research to the neighborhood governance system of community councils in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The results in our study align with earlier studies of other neighborhood governance systems. Specifically, the governing board's internal capacity is positively associated with all three measures of community council effectiveness. Recall that the internal capacity variable consists of underlying survey items related to forming consensus, running meetings, encouraging participation during meetings, managing finances, and so on. In other words, governing boards that are more competent with these leadership and management responsibilities tend to experience stronger outcomes in terms of promoting civic engagement, resolving neighborhood issues, and advising about city policies. That said, our study did not find a significant relationship between the two other aspects of governing board performance (attention-action congruence and external networking) and any of the three measures of community council effectiveness (Li, et al., 2019).

A specific statistic worthy of discussion is the relatively low mean for the community council effectiveness measure of advising about city policies. The mean was 2.90 for advising about city policies, relative to 3.25 for civic engagement and 3.49 for resolving community issues. Recall the measure on advising about city policies consists of underlying survey items related to advising city officials on land use, local service needs, and citywide policies. Additionally, lower scores on contacting the Mayor (or staff) and City Manager (or staff) are noteworthy. These statistics for advising city officials may represent limited engagement overall due to structural factors with city government. One structural factor may be at-large elections for city council members, which do not encourage deep involvement with certain neighborhoods or communities. It also may be related to the strong mayor at the time – when the survey was

conducted – acting as “a major player not only in setting policy but also in the nitty-gritty work of specific projects” in neighborhoods such as Over-the-Rhine (Horn & Coolidge, 2021). The relatively low measure of community council advising could be explored further, possibly facilitated by IIN with support from local foundations and universities, per the recommendation by Musso et al. (2011).

The descriptive statistics demonstrate that community councils in Cincinnati have certain strengths in the internal capacity of their governing boards, such as running meetings and managing financial resources. But there are areas that could be improved such as defining goals, managing conflict, recruiting and managing volunteers, and acquiring grants and resources. With its mission to increase community councils’ capacities and competencies, IIN can devote attention to these identified areas in the coming years. Local foundations and even the City of Cincinnati could assist by providing IIN with additional resources to enhance workshops, training, and so on. This idea relates to another “lesson” in Musso et al. article (2011) that neighborhood councils or community councils have an ongoing need for capacity-building.

A key takeaway from this study is around the organizational structure of community councils in Cincinnati; specifically, these entities are independent nonprofit organizations, distinct from city government. Thus, Cincinnati’s City Council could not vote to disband community councils, as Raleigh’s City Council did with citizen advisory councils (Holder, 2020; Levine, 2020). This takeaway also relates to the Musso article (2011), which concluded that neighborhood governance systems should be structured to allow for endurance through political and administrative changes. In the shadow of Raleigh’s dissolution of CACs, it seems even more timely and important for additional studies of neighborhood governance systems. We encourage interested scholars to study additional neighborhood governance systems in other cities to further

our collective understanding of their formation, structure, roles, activities, and effectiveness. Again, neighborhood governance systems currently exist in major U.S. cities like Atlanta, Honolulu, San Diego, and Washington, DC as well as international cities like Tehran and Shanghai. As with our research of community councils in Cincinnati, these studies could replicate the research that has focused on neighborhood councils in Los Angeles. A shorter-term goal of this extended research may be to identify similarities, differences, and best practices. A longer-term goal may be to complete a more expansive study that cumulates and analyzes data across many cities with neighborhood governance systems, particularly in terms of the overarching goals of engaging citizens in governance, enhancing their sense of efficacy, and even increasing their trust of government.

Disclosure Statement: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

References

- Barati, Z., Samah, B.A., & Ahmad, N. (2012). Sense of community and citizen participation in neighborhood councils in Iran. *Journal of American Science*, 8(1), 655-661.
- Chambré, S. M., & Fatt, N. (2002). Beyond the liability of newness: Nonprofit organizations in an emerging policy domain. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 31(4), 502-524.
- Chen, B., Cooper, T., & Sun, R. (2009). Spontaneous or constructed? Neighborhood governance reforms in Los Angeles and Shanghai. *Public Administration Review*, 69, S108-S115.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40469080>
- City and County of Honolulu. (2021). *Neighborhood Boards*.
<http://www.honolulu.gov/nco/boards.html>
- City of Atlanta (n.d.). *Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU)*.
<https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/departments/city-planning/office-of-zoning-development/neighborhood-planning-unit-npu>
- City of Cincinnati. (2022). *Community Councils*. <https://insights.cincinnati-oh.gov/stories/s/Community-Councils/csw6-ps2a/>
- City of Cincinnati. (n.d.). *Neighborhood Enhancement Program*. <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/community-development/neighborhood-development/nep/>
- City of Cincinnati. (2022). *Cincinnati Community Council Boundaries*. <https://data.cincinnati-oh.gov/Thriving-Neighborhoods/Cincinnati-Community-Council-Boundaries/6aci-7ivg/>
- City of Tacoma. (2020). Neighborhood Council Program.
<https://www.cityoftacoma.org/cms/one.aspx?pageId=21111>
- Community Council Directory. (n.d.)
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qJcx15qqQf2WYGWK6PjXcYtGqz13gJFL25AMEKGkNY/edit#gid=407899492>
- Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D., & Christian, L.M. (2014). *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 4th ed., New York: Wiley.
- DC.gov. (n.d.). *Advisory Neighborhood Commissions*. <https://anc.dc.gov/page/about-ancs>
- Holder, S. (2020, February 6). Raleigh wants to raze and rebuild the community meeting. *Bloomberg CityLab*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-06/why-raleighs-citizen-advisory-groups-got-silenced>

- Horn, D. (2018, May 24). Census: Population tops 300K again in Cincinnati, surges in most suburbs. *Cincinnati Enquirer*.
<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2018/05/24/cincinnati-population-census-estimates-say-its-over-300-000-again/638122002/>
- Horn, D., & Coolidge, S. Analysis: How John Cranley became Cincinnati's most powerful mayor in a century. *Cincinnati Enquirer*.
<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2021/02/08/cincinnati-mayor-how-john-cranley-became-citys-most-powerful-mayor/4330755001/>
- Invest in Neighborhoods (2017a). *About Invest in Neighborhoods*.
<https://www.investinneighborhoods.org/about-invest-in-neighborhoods/>
- Invest in Neighborhoods (2017b). *Neighborhoods Support Program*.
<https://www.investinneighborhoods.org/nsp/>
- Invest in Neighborhoods (2017c). *Neighborhood Councils Action Coalition*.
<https://www.investinneighborhoods.org/ncac/>
- Jun, K.-N. (2007). Event history analysis of the formation of Los Angeles Neighborhood Councils. *Urban Affairs Review*, 43(1), 107–122.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087407302123>
- Kathi, P.C., & Cooper, T.L. (2005). Democratizing the administrative state: Connecting neighborhood councils and city agencies. *Public Administration Review*, 65(5), 559–567.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2005.00483.x>
- Kathi, P.C., & Cooper, T.L. (2007). Connecting neighborhood councils and city agencies: Trust building through the learning and design forum process. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 13(3-4), 617–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2007.12001501>
- Knight, C. (2017, December 6). Cincinnati's Community Councils: FC Cincinnati stadium vote showcased hidden power - and perils. *Cincinnati Enquirer*.
<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/politics/2017/12/06/cincinnati-community-councils-fc-cincinnati-stadium-vote-showcased-hidden-power-and-perils/908887001/>
- Levine, M. (2020, February 10). Raleigh votes to disband neighborhood councils to boost equitable development. *Nonprofit Quarterly*. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/raleigh-votes-to-disband-neighborhood-councils-to-boost-equitable-development/>
- Li, H., Wen, B., & Cooper, T.L. (2019). What makes neighborhood associations effective in urban governance? Evidence from neighborhood council boards in Los Angeles. *The*

- American Review of Public Administration*, 49(8), 931–943.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074019854160>
- McPherson, M. (1983). An ecology of affiliation. *American Sociological Review*, 48(4), 519-532.
- Monks, M. (2021, February 3). How much say do Cincinnati's Community Councils have in City Hall? Cincinnati Public Radio. <https://www.wvxu.org/post/how-much-say-do-cincinnati-community-councils-have-city-hall#stream/0>
- Musso, J.A., Weare, C., Oztas, N., & Loges, W.E. (2006). Neighborhood governance reform and networks of community power in Los Angeles. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 36(1), 79–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074005282586>
- Musso, J., Weare, C., Bryer, T., & Cooper, T.L. (2011). Toward “strong democracy” in global cities? Social capital building, theory-driven reform, and the Los Angeles neighborhood council experience. *Public Administration Review*, 71(1), 102–111.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02311.x>
- Newton, K. (1982). Is small really so beautiful? Is big really so ugly? Size, effectiveness, and democracy in local government. *Political Studies*, 30(2), 190-206.
- Osili, U., Zarins, S., Bergdoll, J., Kou, X., Grossnickle, T., Schipp, D., Canada, A., Ardillo, T., Ernst, L., Knutson, J., Colman, A., & Walker, V. (2018). The impact of diversity: Understanding how nonprofit board diversity affects philanthropy, leadership, and board engagement. <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/15239/board-diversity180220.pdf>
- Sancton, A., & Young, R.A. (2009). *Foundations of Governance: Municipal Government in Canada's Provinces*. University of Toronto Press.
- Serdült, U., & Welp, Y. (2015). How sustainable is democratic innovation? Tracking neighborhood councils in Montevideo. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 7(2), 131-148.

Appendix A: Survey Instrument for Community Council Board Members

Your Community Council

1. As you may know, the City of Cincinnati has 48 Community Councils that represent neighborhoods within the city's boundaries. With this relatively large number of Community Councils, it is expected that there is variation in terms of board size, meeting attendance, key activities, and so on. We'd like to learn more about all of these Community Councils in order to improve and strengthen them. We'd like to learn more about the Community Council in which you're involved. To start, please indicate the group for which you serve as a board member.
 - Avondale Community Council
 - Bond Hill Community Council
 - California Community Council
 - Camp Washington Community Council
 - Carthage Civic League
 - Clifton Town Meeting
 - College Hill Forum
 - Columbia Tusculum Community Council
 - Corryville Community Council
 - CUF Neighborhood Association
 - Downtown Residents Council
 - East End Area Council
 - East Price Hill Improvement Association
 - East Walnut Hills Assembly
 - East Westwood Improvement Association
 - Evanston Community Council
 - Hartwell Improvement Association
 - Hyde Park Neighborhood Council
 - Kennedy Heights Community Council
 - Linwood Community Council
 - Lower Price Hill Community Council
 - Madisonville Community Council
 - Millvale Residents & Community Council
 - Mount Adams Civic Association
 - Mount Airy Town Council
 - Mount Auburn Community Council
 - Mount Lookout Civic Association
 - Mount Washington Community Council
 - North Avondale Neighborhood Association

- North Fairmount Community Council
- Northside Community Council
- Oakley Community Council
- Over-the-Rhine Community Council
- Paddock Hills Assembly
- Pendleton Community Council
- Pleasant Ridge Community Council
- Riverside Civic & Welfare Club
- Roselawn Community Council
- Sayler Park Village Council
- Sedamsville Civic Association
- South Cumminsville Community Council
- South Fairmount Community Council
- Spring Grove Village Community Council
- Walnut Hills Area Council
- West End Community Council
- West Price Hill Community Council
- Westwood Civic Association
- Winton Hills Community Council

2. What is the total number of people who serve on the board of your Community Council?

3. In 2019, what was the AVERAGE number of people who attended your Community Council meetings including board members? In other words, what was the typical attendance at your Community Council meetings last year?

- 1 = 10 people or fewer
- 2 = 11 to 20 people
- 3 = 21 to 30 people
- 4 = 31 to 40 people or more
- 5 = 41 to 50 people
- 6 = 51 people or more

4. In 2019, what was the LARGEST number of people who attend one of your Community Council meetings? ____

Effectiveness

5. Community Councils in Cincinnati – and similar neighborhood councils across the country and around the world – help bridge the relationship between citizens and local governments. These community and neighborhood councils play important roles in “urban governance,” which is the institutional arrangements through which citizens voices are channeled, collective decisions are made, and services are delivered to address community needs and problems. For each area identified below, select the response that best reflects your perceptions of the effectiveness of your Community Council. (Please respond to all items.) In terms of this aspect, I believe that my Community Council is ...

1 = *Not at all effective*

2

3

4

5 = *Extremely effective*

- promoting citizen participation in government.
- enhancing the sense of community or “togetherness” in the neighborhood.
- improving the sense of pride in the neighborhood.
- working to address needs and problems in the neighborhood.
- including diverse interests in the neighborhood.
- advising the city on land use.
- advising the city on local service needs.
- advising the city on citywide policies.

Internal Capacity

6. Generally speaking, the INTERNAL CAPACITY of public and nonprofit organizations, including Community Councils, is the basis upon which they can implement programs and achieve goals. Please indicate the degree to which you agree (or disagree) with the following statements about the internal capacity of your Community Council. (Please respond to all items.)

- *Strongly disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Neither agree or disagree*
- *Agree*
- *Strongly agree*

My Community Council ...

- defines goals clearly.
- runs meetings smoothly.

- forms consensus effectively.
- manages conflict constructively.
- maintains leadership stability.
- recruits and manages volunteers effectively.
- acquires grants and other funds as needed to support programs and activities.
- manages financial resources effectively in terms of budgeting, accounting, and reporting.
- encourages questions and discussion at meetings.
- mediates difficult conversations.

External Networking

7. The EXTERNAL NETWORKING component of a Community Council is the extent to which board members are in contact with community stakeholders such as elected leaders, city administrators or employees, and other individuals and organizations in the community and city. In this section, select the response that best reflects how often you and/or other board members have been in contact with such community stakeholders during the past month. (Please respond to all items.) During the past month, board members (including myself) were in contact with this group of stakeholders ...

- *No contact with these community stakeholders*
- *1 to 2 times*
- *3 to 4 times*
- *5 to 6 times*
- *More than 6 times*

- Elected leaders in the City of Cincinnati (e.g., mayor, city council members)
- City administrators or employees (e.g., city manager, city planners, police officers, park officials)
- Invest in Neighborhoods (IIN) board members or staff
- Other community organizations (e.g., schools, libraries, development corporations, local businesses, other Community Councils).

Issue Attention

8. The ISSUE ATTENTION component of a Community Council is the degree to which board members focus their time and energy on various issues in the neighborhood. In this section, select the response that best reflects the degree to which your Community Council discussed each issue below during the past calendar year – January through December 2019. (Please respond to all items.) During the past calendar year, my Community Council discussed this issue ...

- *Never*

- *Rarely*
 - *Occasionally*
 - *Frequently*
 - *Always*
-
- crime, law enforcement, public safety
 - planning, zoning, land use
 - development, redevelopment, revitalization
 - recreation centers, pools, golf courses
 - parks and greenspace
 - streets, parking, sidewalks, bike paths
 - garbage collection, yard-waste collection, snow removal, street sweeping
 - community events and activities
 - youth-focused activities

Action

9. The ACTION component examines the extent to which Community Council board members have been in contact with city departments and agencies. In this section, select the response that best reflects the extent to which your Community Council board members were in contact with each city department during the past calendar year – January through December 2019. (Please respond to all items.) During the past calendar year, board members (including myself) contacted this government agency ...

- *Never*
 - *Rarely*
 - *Occasionally*
 - *Frequently*
 - *Always*
-
- Cincinnati Police Department
 - City Planning
 - Department of Community and Economic Development
 - Cincinnati Recreation Commission and/or rec centers
 - Cincinnati Parks
 - Department of Transportation and Engineering
 - Department of Public Services

Demographic Information

As part of this research, we are trying to get a better understanding of the individuals who serve on Community Council boards in the City of Cincinnati. Please help us by completing the

questions in this section of the survey. As a reminder, the information that you provide is anonymous; in other words, you do not provide your name, and the data will not be identified with you. Also, the survey results will be presented in an aggregated form; that is, the data will not be reported out at the individual or Community Council level.

10. How many years have you lived in your neighborhood?

- 4 years or less
- 5 to 9 years
- 10 to 14 years
- 15 to 19 years
- 20 years or more

11. How old are you?

- Under 18 years old
- 18 to 29 years old
- 30 to 39 years old
- 40 to 49 years old
- 50 to 59 years old
- 60 to 69 years old
- 70 years old or older

12. Which of the following best represents your race or ethnicity?

- White
- Black or African American
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Two or More Races
- Unknown

13. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin?

- No
- Yes

14. To which gender identity do you most identify?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Something else

15. To which sexual orientation do you most identify?
- Straight (not gay, lesbian, or bisexual)
 - Gay or lesbian
 - Bisexual
 - Something else
16. Do you consider yourself a person with a disability?
- No
 - Yes
17. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
- Less than a high school diploma
 - High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
 - Some college credit, no degree
 - Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS)
 - Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)
 - Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd)
 - Professional degree (e.g., MD, DDS, JD)
 - Doctorate (e.g., PhD, EdD)
18. How would you describe your current living situation?
- I own my residence.
 - I rent my residence.
 - Other (please explain: _____)
19. What is your current employment status?
- Employed full time (32 hours per week or more)
 - Employed part time (up to 31 hours per week)
 - Unemployed and currently looking for work
 - Unemployed and not currently looking for work (e.g., stay-at-home parent)
 - Retired
 - Student
 - Military
 - Unable to work
20. What is your current household income?
- Less than \$20,000
 - \$20,000 to \$39,999
 - \$40,000 to \$59,999
 - \$60,000 to \$79,999

- \$80,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$119,999
- \$120,000 to \$139,999
- \$140,000 or more