CITIZEN ATTITUDES TOWARD A HOME RULE COUNTY CHARTER

Rex M. Rogers
I. INTRODUCTION

County government organizational structure in the state of Ohio has remained virtually unchanged since the state constitution was ratified in 1851. With the exception of Akron's Summit County, Ohio's 88 counties are politically circumscribed with very specific grants of power and no "implied powers" permitting them to respond to new or unforeseen problems.1

However, governments of all levels have experienced tremendous increases in the number and complexity of the demands they have been asked to service. Counties have not been immune to this phenomenon, particularly those within whose borders are found large cities surrounded by several smaller municipalities and densely populated residential areas. The result has been a group of urban counties attempting to act like municipalities without the enabling legislation or the organizational apparatus to do so.

In an attempt to mitigate these problems, county government reorganization has been suggested by many interested "reformers." Reorganization involves a fundamental restructuring or "modernization" of county government so that counties may respond to twentieth-century problems in a more efficient and effective manner. A now lengthy list of creative reorganization models have been offered by would-be "reformers" and political scientists.2

Reorganization suggestions seem logical and well-intentioned, but citizens throughout the United States have repeatedly rejected proposals designed to reorganize, consolidate or alter the organizational structure of county governments.4 This pattern is so strongly entrenched that scholars consider voter acceptance the deviant case and rejection the norm. With the exception of Summit County, voters in Ohio have also typically rejected county reorganization plans.3

Political scholars have gradually begun to recognize that local residents differ in basic values, and therefore attitudes and priorities, from many proponents of reorganization. Some students of local government reorganization note that citizens fear potential reallocations of political and economic power, some fear sociodemographic changes involving race and ethnicity, others fear "big government," and many are simply apathetic.6

Despite these studies, however, reasons for citizen resistance to reorganization remain obscured. Most political science analysis has been conducted with data gained from city/county consolidation efforts, while little is known about citizen attitudes toward more incremental and less comprehensive local government reorganization proposals. Research has typically focused upon metropolitan issues rather than upon county government. And, political science research has been limited almost entirely to voting statistics or surveys administered after elections. Very few efforts have been made to measure citizen perception prior to a local government reorganization campaign.

The purpose of this study is to address some of these deficiencies in political science scholarship by focusing upon citizen attitudes toward an Ohio home rule county charter campaign. County home rule charters are generally less ambitious efforts than city/county consolidation, threatening fewer local interests and therefore theoretically entertaining a greater chance of success. As less comprehensive and more incremental reorganization proposals, charters would seem to offer citizens a reasonable response to county government problems.

II. METHODOLOGY

Several questions guided this research. First, is there any perception on the part of the general public of a "crisis" in local government? Second, do demographic variables influence citizen attitudes toward local government change? Third, are the attitude of citizens toward a home rule charter the same or similar to those that have repeatedly been expressed toward consolidation? In other words, will citizens respond differently toward incremental political change than they typically have responded toward more comprehensive change?
The research reported draws upon data from a survey of Hamilton County (Cincinnati), Ohio residents in November 1981. A set of ten questions were administered via the Greater Cincinnati Survey (GCS), which is conducted semi-annually by the Institute for Policy Research of the University of Cincinnati. The GCS involved approximately 1,100 cases representing a random sample of Hamilton County residents 18 years of age or older.

In each section that follows, the data first exhibited details the responses of all Hamilton County residents, followed by crosstabulations of citizen responses with demographic and political variables. Only the most noteworthy demographic and political variable tables have been included; all others have been omitted to conserve space.

III. FINDINGS

A. COUNTY GOVERNMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Earlier research has indicated that a "crisis" may be necessary before citizens would seriously consider changing the structure of local government. To assess the degree to which citizens in Hamilton County perceive any crises in county government and therefore a need for reorganization, respondents were asked a series of three questions about county government before any mention was made of a proposed home rule charter. Table 1 details the responses to the question of how important residents believe Hamilton County government is to the quality of their life. Just slightly more than one-half indicate they believe county government is fairly or somewhat important while 43.1% responded even more strongly saying it was extremely important.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. County Government Important to Quality of Life?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Too Important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = 1100)

As was evidenced in the pretest, county government is not a well-known nor often discussed part of the average citizen's life. Several researchers have noted this distinct lack of interest or outright apathy on the part of voters toward county government and believe that it acts as an anti-reform influence in local campaigns. In this respect, the rather high percentage of respondents rating county government as important to their quality of life is somewhat surprising. Even when the known tendency of respondents to inflate their interest is taken into account, the high rating remains formidable.

Table 2 illustrates the strongest demographic influences. Race is particularly interesting in that this issue might be regarded as a difficult one with which Blacks and other minorities must cope. Blacks have realized most of the gain in their quality of life in the last two decades by appealing to the national government. Through federal legislation and court decisions Blacks have accomplished many of their goals as a group, bypassing local and state levels in the process. Consequently, any reference to local levels would seem to be less meaningful to Blacks. Also, it may be argued that larger and less parochial governments like the county may be more responsive to Blacks and other minorities than municipalities. But Blacks have exercised more political "clout" within cities than in city hinterlands. Scholars have noted that minorities have been chary toward reform for a variety of reasons.

In view of these considerations, it is especially interesting that Blacks in Hamilton County rate the county government as significantly more important to the quality of their life than do Whites. A difference of some 13% indicates a fair divergence of opinion between the two groups, 54.4% versus 41.1%. Perhaps Blacks feel government is their ally regardless of the level.

Older respondents are more likely to feel county government is extremely important to the quality of their lives. Earlier research has revealed a more imbalanced relationship. Young voters must be convinced county government is important, and older voters must be persuaded that there exists a problem sufficiently troublesome to require change.
TABLE 2. County Government Quality of Life by Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>EXTREMELY IMPORTANT</th>
<th>FAIRLY IMPORTANT</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT</th>
<th>NOT TOO IMPORTANT</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 29</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 45</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 to 64</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 and Older</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RACE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>921</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. COUNTY GOVERNMENT BETTER OR WORSE

To further assess the possibility of political change in Hamilton County, respondents were asked to consider whether the way county government was run over the past three or four years had gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same. Table 3 lists the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3. County Government Better or Worse?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed About the Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = 1130)

Only 15.8% believe the way the county is run has gotten worse along with an even greater amount, 21.7%, who do not know. These results would seem to lend credence to the belief that county residents did not actively desire change, nor was there any perception of a crisis in the politico-administrative aspects of county government. Demographic and political variables did not substantially alter these relationships. Any number of plausible reasons might account for this phenomenon, ranging from a lack of knowledge about county government, to apathy, to an inertia and status quo orientation typical of American citizens. Clearly, anxiety about county government was not high.

C. "WHY" COUNTY GOVERNMENT BETTER OR WORSE

Following the respondents' indication that they believed county government operation is better or worse, they were asked "why" they believed this to be so. Table 4 reveals a broader range of responses among those believing county government is better run than those feeling it is worse.

Not surprisingly, of those residents indicating they believe county government is run better, most (13.9%) could not offer a detailed and specific reason when given the opportunity. If those offering only "general impression" responses, either better or worse, are taken collectively, it becomes apparent that more do not know why they feel as they do toward county government than otherwise. Responses like "seems better," "it's not worse," "it's not better," or "seems worse" are not deeply substantive comments.

Some 21.7% had earlier indicated they did not know whether county government is run better or worse (Table 3). Together these figures seem to cast a shadow over the previous discussion regarding the importance of county government to one's quality of life. Whether the public believes county government is important or not, a sizeable proportion do not know much about it. A finding such as this would seem to further strengthen the contention that no real crisis existed in terms of the public's perception of county operations.

Among those offering specific answers, there is evidence of some

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knowledge about county government's functions. "Better" comments are more often related to the actual performance of county government than to any other possible observation. People feeling county government is run "worse" also relate certain failures in specific performance of services. Residents apparently think of county government in terms of service delivery.

D. HEARD OF HOME RULE CHARTER

Respondents were asked whether they had heard of "Home Rule" or the "County Charter" in order to introduce a possible control on the issue questions following. Only 26.2% indicated they had heard of the charter. This figure is consistent with the generally low salience citizens assign to county government and comports well with the findings of earlier research. Proponents of change face a greater challenge than do change opponents.

A check of respondent demographic characteristics revealed differential effects upon whether the respondent had heard of the charter. Expected patterns emerged with the older, higher educated and income groups, and males more likely to have heard of the document. Slightly more Whites than Blacks indicated they had heard of the charter, but this relationship moderates when the effects of education or income are controlled.

Socio-economic status significantly influenced respondent positions with 80% of those earning less than $25,000 per year indicating they had not heard of the charter while only 66% of those earning more had not heard of the charter. In this it is consistent with previous research. However, since it later made little difference on their selection of the charter or present form, it would appear that information alone is not enough to convince voters to change.

E. HOME RULE - BIG GOVERNMENT

Table 5 details the responses of three questions regarding perceptions about the likely affect of a charter upon the business of government. Citizens are divided almost evenly, 46.7% agreeing and 51.5% disagreeing, that the charter will bring big government.

Education, followed closely by race, exercises the greatest impact upon whether a respondent believes the charter is big government. Higher education groups are less likely to perceive the charter in big government terms, while Blacks are much more likely than Whites...
to see it as big government.

Whether or not citizens perceive the charter as big government has considerable influence upon their choice. Those who strongly agree that the charter is big government are much more likely to opt to keep the present structure of government in place, 25.3% versus 7.8%.

With respect to the possibility of political change, a big government issue would appear to be a dangerous one. The experience of previous research has been that the more comprehensive and far-reaching the proposed change is conceived to be by the voter, the less likely he or she is to vote for it.15

It would appear that the burden of proof in this instance lies with the proponents of change. Big government arguments and analogies need not necessarily be made by opponents for them to be effective. Apparently citizens are capable of generating this view on their own.

F. HOME RULE - MORE EXPENSIVE

The second issue of interest in Table 5 involves the degree to which respondents believe county government would become more expensive after a charter adoption. Clearly, Hamilton County residents associate higher costs with county government change. Demographic and political breakdowns revealed similar feelings.

Any governmentally-related suggestion that even hints of more costs is not likely to be greeted with open arms. Some 77% of those who agree the charter would be more expensive chose to stay with the present form of government. Interestingly, though, 58.1% who agreed the charter would be more expensive still opted for change, possibly on the strength of other issues.

G. HOME RULE - MINORITY REPRESENTATION

Table 5 also illustrates citizen attitudes toward the degree to which the proposed charter would increase minority representation. An overwhelming percentage of voters believe the charter will increase minority representation, 80.9% agreeing to 17.6% disagreeing.

Generally, the same pattern of agreement responses is apparent among all demographic and political attribute groups with the exception of race. Blacks are more likely to strongly agree minority representation will increase than are Whites, 57.4% versus 39.9%, and are slightly more prone to agree in general, 82.3% versus 80.9%, respectively.

Increased representation for minorities appears to be an attractive argument for the charter. Among those voting to adopt a home rule charter, 52.8% strongly agree that minority representation would increase compared to 32.7% among those choosing to maintain the traditional governmental structure.

Some studies have demonstrated that increased representation was indeed attractive to voters. The strongly favorable response of Hamilton County citizens to this issue appears to support the contention that the general public more often responds to representation and responsiveness arguments than to reformers' claims of efficiency and operational effective-
ness. Since representation lies at the heart of the home rule concept, it represents a key issue for supporters of this type of political change. For opponents of change, it is a very difficult issue to be "against."

H. HOME RULE - COMMISSIONERS' POWERS

A substantial majority of respondents, 68.1%, believe that giving county commissioners the power to create new programs and administrative procedures while not permitting new taxing power is a good addition. This majority support is held among all demographic groups although with some variation. Some support for new program powers declines with age from 72.8% among those less than 29 years of age to 56.7% for those over 65 years of age. Likewise there is a marked difference between Blacks and Whites, with Blacks more supportive of new program powers, 80.6% versus 65.7%. And attitudes toward new program powers are unquestionably influencing respondents' choice of form of government. Among those who opted to keep the present form of government, some 43.9% believed new programs with no new taxes would be a good development. Among those preferring a home rule charter, 87.4% believe new programs with no new taxes is a good development.

Many past campaigns have shown that the simple logic of a new governmental system is not enough to convince voters to accept change. In Hamilton County, however, there appeared to be a strong predisposition to accept a change that would give local representatives more administrative alternatives. The campaign burden lies both with opponents of the charter who must convince voters that new powers would not be a good thing to have, and with proponents of the charter who must convince voters that new powers would not increase taxes.

I. PRESENT OR HOME RULE FORM

Respondents were asked whether they thought the present form of government or the proposed home rule form would be better for their quality of life in Hamilton County. Table 6 reveals that 17.9% indicated they could not make a choice at the time the survey was administered. A plurality of respondents indicated they favored the proposed home rule charter form over the present form of county government, 44.2% versus 36.2%.

**TABLE 6. Vote for County Government's Present Form or Home Rule Forms?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Present Form</th>
<th>Home Rule Form</th>
<th>Both Equally Good</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>%</strong></td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(N = 1119)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Previous research has indicated that people in high education and income groups tend to support reform efforts. In Hamilton County, citizens with a B.A. or more opted for the charter in 62.7% of the cases thus supporting these earlier findings. However, the other educational categories did not reveal a linearly supportive pattern. Income revealed an equally volatile pattern quite unlike that found in research examining more extensive efforts at local government change. In income and education there were internal differences between groups, but both were of lower predictive value than previous theory suggested.

Professional/technical groups have tended to be the most supportive of comprehensive change while skilled operatives and craftsmen have less often opted for comprehensive change. Hamilton County was again much more inconclusive. Professionals in Hamilton County gave the charter its greatest support among occupational groups at 56.9%. This percentage, however, is not that different from all the other occupational categories.

Some previous studies have found that those under 30 and over 65 are the most apt to oppose governmental reform. In Hamilton County there is clearly an inverse linear relationship between age and support for a charter with 60.4% of those under 29 years of age preferring Home Rule to 41.2% of those over 65 years of age preferring home rule.

Scholars have noted that Blacks are not enthusiastic supporters of change. But in Hamilton County some 63.0% of Blacks and 53.3% of Whites opt for a charter. Blacks apparently have responded to some of the issues presented
TABLE 7. Why Choose Home Rule Form or Present Form of County Government?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOME RULE</th>
<th>PRESENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom From State</td>
<td>No Complaints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to People</td>
<td>It Works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Representation</td>
<td>Home Rule Expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Impression</td>
<td>Used to System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More People in Decisions</td>
<td>Don't Know Home Rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Returned to People</td>
<td>Need State Supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Big Government</td>
<td>Changes Bring Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minorities Better Represented</td>
<td>HR - Too Many People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Tax Increases</td>
<td>HR - More Taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Better</td>
<td>HR - Programs But No Taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Jobs, Opportunities</td>
<td>HR - Big Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR - Name Sounds Good</td>
<td>HR - Too Powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Local Control</td>
<td>Don't Need More County Gov't</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Interest in People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Commissioners is Better</td>
<td>N = (340)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioners Can Do a Better Job</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = (453)

* Entries in this table represent comments given by 5 or more respondents.

and the possibility of increased representation for minorities and are voting accordingly.

Suburbanites and rural dwellers have consistently been found to oppose local government structural change.21 In Hamilton County, however, there was virtually no difference in the perspectives of suburbanites and city dwellers toward the charter.

J. "WHY" PRESENT OR HOME RULE FORM

Respondents were asked why they opted for the present form of government or the home rule charter to determine what issues or values might be the most pertinent in influencing their choice. Among those choosing the charter, Table 7 demonstrates that representational issues clearly are the most often cited. Consistent with the support found earlier in Table 5, representation continues to strike a responsive chord among citizens.

For those opting to maintain the present structure of government, the feeling is one of complacency. "No complaints, it works, used to the system, (and) change brings problems," all reflect a lack of desire to change. The largest single issue is again consistent with the findings of Table 5. Some 15.3% believe that a home rule charter will result in a more expensive county government.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Local government reorganization efforts have more often been defeated than passed. Citizens consistently resist suggestions for local government change even in the face of well-conceived alternative governmental forms and well-planned and implemented campaigns. The results of this research, though providing some interesting new insights, seems nevertheless to support earlier findings.

Although the local government reform proposed to the respondents in this study was a county home rule charter that called for less change than is typical for more comprehensive city/county consolidation campaigns, residents still preferred the status quo. Residents did not perceive a "crisis" in county government and consequently were content to allow local government to proceed "unreformed." Residents clearly require more reasons to change than promises of improved efficiency or service effectiveness.

Political and demographic characteristics did influence citizen perception,
but not nearly as clearly or uniformly as earlier studies have contended. Political variables in particular demonstrated little predictive capacity.

Demographic variables exercised expected influence upon citizen attitudes toward county government change. Higher education and income groups, males, voters, and older residents had heard of the charter more often than their counterparts. Support for the charter came from the same groups with the exception of older residents; in this case, younger residents more often favored a charter. Blacks endorsed a charter more often than Whites, perhaps because it promised increased minority representation.

Respondents were fairly evenly divided over whether they felt a home rule charter would result in bigger government. Virtually all groups believed a charter would increase minority representation and increase government expense. While the promise of better representation helped Blacks decide for the charter over the present form of county government, the charter's big and expensive government image clearly deterred voter support.

These data suggest that political change at the local level is likely to be rare, incremental, and reactive (that is, dependent upon some "crisis"). County government reorganization is therefore, like all politics, a struggle of values. Choosing a new local government structure is not a simple decision identifying the "one best method" of government. Reformers bear the burden of proof; citizens must be convinced. Tactical advantages in campaigns would seem, therefore, to lie with opponents of change.

ENDNOTES

1. The author wishes to thank The Stephen H. Wilder Foundation for generously providing two grants funding the survey research. The foundation's purpose is "to provide research in the field of public affairs affecting the Cincinnati area." Considerable appreciation is also due to Alfred J. Tuchfarber and W. Donald Heisel, at the time both of the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati, who read earlier dissertation versions of this manuscript and offered valuable editorial advice. Errors of fact and judgement are the author's own.

Home Rule Charter by a 62.5% margin in November 1979. Although several other county home rule movements have been attempted, Summit remains Ohio's only home rule example. For an update on Summit County's experience, see Carl Lieberman, "Ohio's First Charter County: Three Years of Change in Summit," National Civic Review, 73 (September 1984), pp. 382-389. See also Frank J. Kendrick, "A Charter For Summit County (or, How to Challenge the Status Quo, and Win)," pp. 293-328 in Carl Lieberman, ed., Government and Politics in Ohio (Lanham, MD: Press of America, 1984).


7. A pretest of some thirty respondents indicated an even lower general knowledge of county government issues than even the researcher had anticipated. Questions were, therefore, reworded, simplified, and in general made as understandable as possible.

Two other surveys were also used but are not reported here. Both were conducted in February and April 1981 by Market Opinion Research (MOR) of Detroit, Michigan, on behalf of the Coalition to Draft a County Charter. Each survey was administered to 500 randomly selected Hamilton County residents 18 years of age or older.
Four of the questions included in the GCS replicated questions asked in the MOR polls. In addition, twenty-six area "elites" were also identified and questioned. These elites' attitudes were compared with those of the citizens reported here. For a full discussion of these findings, see Rogers, op. cit.
8. Each question was crosstabulated with the following variables: education, occupation, age, race, income, residence (Cincinnati or outside Cincinnati), sex, ideology (Liberal, Moderate, Conservative), political party identification, whether or not the respondent voted in the previous election, and whether they preferred the present form of county government or the home rule charter form.
9. "Crisis" is operationally defined as any problem sufficiently serious to require structural change. For discussions of "crises" in local government change see Dolbeare, Rosenbaum and Kammerer, Sofen, Marando (1975), op. cit.
11. See the research on survey research such as George F. Bishop, Robert W. Oldendick, and Alfred J. Tuchfarber, "Effects of Question Wording and Format on Political Attitude Consistency," Public Opinion Quarterly, 42 (1978), pp. 81-92.
15. Advisory Committee, op. cit.; Scott, op. cit.
18. Greer; Roth and Boynton, op. cit.
19. Hawley and Zimmer; Lyons op. cit.
20. See Hawkins (1966), op. cit. for a case in which race had little influence. See the following studies wherein race played a key role: Greer, Martin; Sloan, op. cit.