

Disagreement: Perceptions of Local Control Among Wisconsin Local Officials

By Michael Ford, PhD



Whitburn Center for
Governance and Policy Research

800 Algoma Blvd. | Oshkosh, WI 54901
PHONE (920) 424-1580 | WEB uwosh.edu/whitburn-center/

About the Whitburn Center

Mission Statement

The Whitburn Center conducts practical applied research focused on evaluating and improving governance, professional management, and public policy in Wisconsin and beyond.

Philosophy and Values

Our vision is to build local government, nonprofit, and community capacity to promote the common good. We will bring people together across ideological divides to discover nonpartisan solutions. The Whitburn Center will share innovative, research-based knowledge, equipping our partners to address their most pressing needs, while utilizing equitable, efficient, and effective strategies.

Advisory Board Members

- Gerald Whitburn, Ex-Officio Member and Founding Donor
- Scott McCallum, Inaugural Advisory Board Chair
- Raymond P. Taffora, Member
- Ellen Nowak, Member
- Kathryn Schauf, Member
- Mark Rohloff, Member
- Benjamin Krumenauer, Member
- Sachin Shivaram, Member

Executive Summary

The Issue: Wisconsin local governments obtain their power from the state. But, a series of mandates and other legislative actions have continuously shifted powers from the local to the state level. More recently, the concept of local control has been weaponized as a rhetorical device during political debates. The goal of this report is to determine how Wisconsin's local government leaders view local control.

The Method: In this paper we present survey results from a sample of 288 local government leaders. We use the results to determine how local government leaders define local control, whether they agree with their colleagues regarding the meaning of local control, and whether perceptions of local control are predicted by identifiable characteristics.

The Findings: There is widespread disagreement on the meaning of local control in Wisconsin.

- Over half of respondents view local control as active, i.e., being able to use power as defined or delegated, whereas the other 46.55 percent define local control as passive, i.e., through limits placed by higher levels of government.
- City officials are more likely than county officials to feel that local control has decreased over the past five years.
- City executives and department heads are more likely than elected officials to agree that the powers of their government are well-defined in relation to state and overlapping governments.
- Respondents believe the state should be more responsible for public safety and election administration than they are now but also believe both should remain more of a local or shared function. Respondents believe land use issues, K-12 education, taxation, and higher education decisions should have more local input than they do currently.
- Self-identified conservatives are much more likely to believe there is an imbalance regarding what is and what should be a local responsibility.
- There are significant ambiguities and disagreements among local actors as to where their power lies and how their understanding of local control aligns, or does not align, with colleagues' perceptions.
- Open-ended survey responses reveal a general pessimism regarding local control as a practically relevant governing concept.

The Lesson: Meaningful local action on emerging and fast-moving issues, like the COVID-19 response, is hampered when actors do not coalesce around a common understanding of their powers and responsibilities. Basic governing questions, like who should be doing what and when, need to be answered and agreed upon before effective governance can occur. From a practical standpoint, local governments can incorporate the concept of local control into the strategic planning process via a SWOT analysis, and in the onboarding process for new staff and officials, to create an organizational definition of local control. Such a definition will not eliminate policy disagreements and is subject to change over time, but it will at the very least solidify how municipal leadership understands local control at a point in time.

Introduction

Local control is enshrined in Article XI of the Wisconsin Constitution, where it states:

Cities and villages organized pursuant to state law may determine their local affairs and government, subject only to this constitution and to such enactments of the legislature of statewide concern as with uniformity shall affect every city or every village. The method of such determination shall be prescribed by the legislature.

The concept itself stems from the assumption that policies created by governing bodies closest to those they impact will be most effective. For example, residents are more likely to support an education policy created by their local school board than one created at the federal level. The logic is supported by consistent polling showing that citizens place a higher degree of trust in local government compared to state and federal governments (Kettl, 2018). Local control is also a hallmark of the U.S. federalist system, creating space for diverse local policies under a common state government structure.

However, there is evidence that the meaning of local control is continuously changing in Wisconsin. A May 1st, 2018 memo from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, for example, lists well over 100 state legislative changes that decreased local control in Wisconsin between 2011 and 2018.¹ Why is this happening? As Norton Long wrote in 1949, administrative power is finite. Hence, more power for one government actor, be it an agency, an executive, or a level of government, means less for another. Long also wrote that power is the lifeblood of administration, suggesting that government can best be understood through the struggle for power. Recent political battles in Wisconsin have focused on the balance between state and local power regarding key issues, including COVID-19 policy, local sales tax implementation, and revenue limits.

While the concept of local control is frequently deployed rhetorically during political debates, it is rarely defined in a consistent and understood manner among those actually engaged in governing. The ambiguity of the concept allows it to be weaponized at the fault lines between administration and politics. In this report we conclude that the concept of local control in government has little practical meaning if it is not understood by those actually engaged in the governing process. Hence, we present survey results from a mix of local Wisconsin government officials to better understand how they define local control in practice.

Background on Local Control

The concept of local control is rooted in the legal foundations of the United States (U.S.) government. The U.S. Constitution makes no mention of local government, thus creating ambiguity regarding the powers and responsibilities therein (Nickels, 2016; Kettl, 2018). The formal ambiguity around local control is lessened by the specific parameters of the state-local

¹ https://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/democrats/media/1159/lfb_local-control-memo_512018.pdf

relationship defined in state constitutions, as well as through the advance of case law (Park, 2018; Richardson Jr., 2011). Dillon's Rule outlines a narrow interpretation of local control where municipalities may only use powers explicitly granted to them by the state (Burke, 2014). The idea of home rule is more expansive, giving local governments powers that are fairly implied and/or essential to the operations of a municipal corporation (Richardson Jr., 2011; Burke, 2014). However, as Richardson Jr. (2011) concludes, Dillon's Rule refers to a legal concept, while home rule is more about the exercise of federalism and thus represents an imperfect dichotomy for understanding the true nature of local control. The idea of home rule itself is filled with ambiguities (such as an inconsistent interpretation of implied and essential powers) that are sorted out by the courts when disagreements arise (Swanson & Barrilleaux, 2020).

Perlman (2016) refers to local control as "a convenient 'legal fiction' that has been enshrined in our history and incorporated in our system of government operations through a device known as home rule (189)." As recent work on preemption concludes, home rule is in fact a state dominated construct that changes in ways that cannot be controlled nor often predicted by local government actors (Goodman, Hatch & McDonald, 2020). As the local government response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates, preemption of local authority by state action is a constant force shaping the nature of local control (McDonald, Goodman & Hatch, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is also an example of how external shocks reshape the nature of U.S. federalism (Wang & Pagano, 2017).

Local control is also a political concept that is frequently weaponized as a rhetorical device. Blair and Starke Jr. (2017) argue that home rule facilitates greater pursuit of policy goals, as opposed to administrative goals, within local government. Public choice theorists, on the other hand, argue that governing decisions made at the level of government represented by those most impacted by the decision are most effective (Howell-Moroney, 2008). This neoclassical position is reflected in longstanding Conservative calls for greater devolution of federal power to the states.

Overall, the academic literature on local control and federalism is sprawling. Consistent themes within that literature relevant to this study are preemption, the locus of local control, the role of ideology in interpreting federalism, the relationship between state and local officials (see: Wood (2011)), and most importantly the ambiguity of local control in practice. Our primary focus is on advancing the last theme, ambiguity, in order to better understand how governing officials' ideas of local control influence the governing process. In the following section we detail our survey instrument and data collection process.

Survey and Data

Survey research measures perceptions of phenomena as opposed to objective reality. In the case of local control, objective approaches deal with legal concepts like Dillon's Rule and the fiscal and regulatory relationship between levels of government. But, in the application of governance, perceptions can be more important than reality. Both local elected officials and career managers must make decisions, implement policies, and pursue goals based on the perceptions of all involved in the governance process. The right course of action is often a function of a realism-

based consensus rather than an objective process (Linblom, 1979). A course of action must be accepted by the public, whether it is objectively the correct course of action or not, to be effectively implemented. In the case of local control, the perceptions of governing actors can shape both the locus of control at the local level and the relationship between governments (both vertical and horizontal).

This study utilizes a “perceptions are reality” framework, in which macro-governance arrangements provide order to micro-governance actors going through the daily task of decision-making at the organizational level. In the context of local control, the macro-governance arrangement is the application of federalism defining the relationship between local government and its state masters. Micro-governance refers to the local government actors, in this case elected officials, municipal executives, and department heads, making and administering local policy. The framework is built on the idea that governance is a human exercise where human perceptions, even when flawed or disjointed, impact governing outcomes. The framework is built on several propositions, including that:

- Performance and public acceptance are based on human consensus.
- Perceptions of group dynamics by governing actors impacts performance.
- Coalescence around the meaning of key concepts is essential for them to have practical meaning.

The survey instrument used in this analysis was developed in the summer of 2020. In September of 2020, the 16-question survey was e-mailed to 1,058 local government elected officials and municipal managers (executives and department heads) with publicly listed e-mail addresses.² A total of 288 individuals from 131 local governments responded, for a response rate of 27.2 percent. Of the 288 responses, 219 are from current elected officials (city council members and county board members), and 69 are city or county employees (14 municipal executives and 55 department heads). A total of 73 respondents (25.25 percent) are from Wisconsin county governments, while 215 (74.65 percent) are from Wisconsin city governments. As a check against response bias, characteristics of municipalities represented in the sample were compared with characteristics of Wisconsin municipalities generally. Overall, the sample consists of municipalities that are similar in terms of fiscal indicators (property tax levels and revenue sources per capita) to state averages.

After collecting survey results, all responses were matched with 2019 fiscal and population data provided by the Wisconsin Department of Revenue. Thus, the matched dataset consists of both survey data collected from municipal leaders and administrative data. Table One displays the results of six Likert scale questions where respondents were asked, “To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1= Strong, intense disagreement, 2= Disagreement, 3= Neutral, mixed agreement and disagreement, 4= Agreement, 5= Strong, intense agreement).” Table Two displays summary statistics for the same items for subgroups of respondents. As can be seen, simple exploratory comparison of means tests show that city officials were more likely to feel

² The sampling frame consisted of 215 Wisconsin cities and 70 Counties, which is the population minus the obvious outliers of Milwaukee and Madison, and Milwaukee and Dane County.

local control has decreased over the past five and ten years than county officials. City executives and department heads were more likely than elected officials to agree that the powers of their government are well-defined in relation to state and overlapping governments.

Table One: Respondent Perceptions of Local Control

| | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|--|-------|-----------|
| In the past five years, local control over key functions/policy areas has decreased. | 2.67 | 0.933 |
| In the past ten years, local control over key functions/policy areas has decreased. | 2.293 | 0.888 |
| My government works well with state government. | 3.438 | 0.744 |
| My government works well with other overlapping municipal governments. | 3.676 | 0.786 |
| The powers of my government in relation to state government are well-defined. | 3.446 | 0.787 |
| The powers of my government in relation to other overlapping municipal governments are well-defined. | 3.526 | 0.728 |
| N | 288 | |

Table Two: Respondent Perceptions of Local Control by Subgroup

| | Cities | Counties | | | Elected Official | City Staff | |
|--|--------|----------|------------------------|--|------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| | Mean | Mean | Different at 95% Level | | Mean | Mean | Different at 95% Level? |
| In the past five years, local control over key functions/policy areas has decreased. | 2.735 | 2.48 | Yes | | 2.64 | 2.768 | No |
| In the past ten years, local control over key functions/policy areas has decreased. | 2.374 | 2.055 | Yes | | 2.27 | 2.362 | No |
| My government works well with state government. | 3.447 | 3.411 | No | | 3.361 | 3.681 | Yes |
| My government works well with other overlapping municipal governments. | 3.642 | 3.778 | No | | 3.633 | 3.812 | Yes |
| The powers of my government in relation to state government are well-defined. | 3.442 | 3.458 | No | | 3.454 | 3.42 | No |
| The powers of my government in relation to other overlapping municipal governments are well-defined. | 3.519 | 3.548 | No | | 3.5 | 3.623 | No |
| N | 215 | 73 | | | 218 | 69 | |

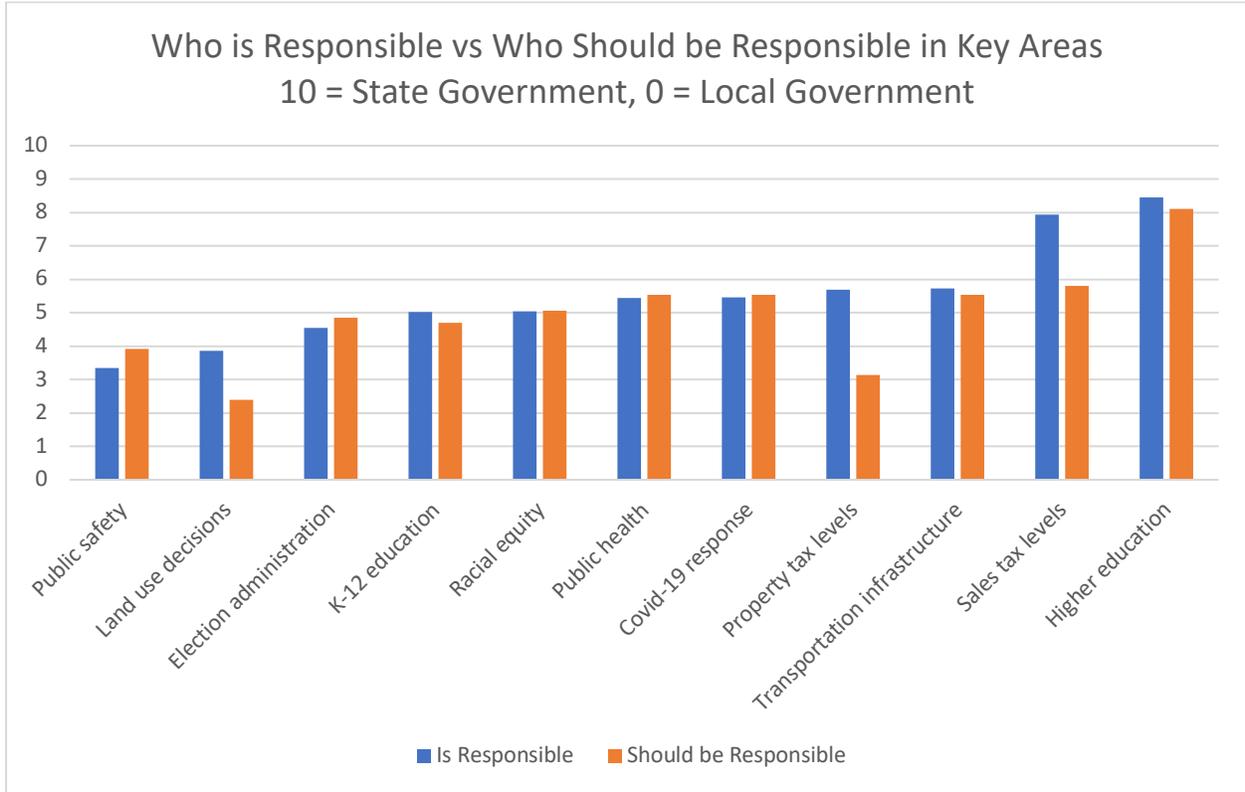
Summary statistics for continuous variables used in the models are displayed in Table Three. Years in position refers to the number of years the respondent has served in their current position. As can be seen, the population variable has a large standard deviation that is influenced by the several very small and very large Wisconsin cities. The author addresses this non-normal distribution by logging the variable in all models used. Shared Revenue Per Capita is a relative measure of state fiscal support, specifically the total amount of state municipal aid received by the local government, divided by population. Expenditure Per Capita measures total government expenditures divided by population. The survey results also revealed that the majority of respondents, 68.64 percent, identified as independent/non-partisan in their ideology, while 15.68 percent identified as liberal and 10.80 percent identified as conservative respectively (4.88 percent preferred not to state an ideology). The large number of independent/non-partisan respondents is not surprising given that the positions are all officially non-partisan, and that is consistent with previous work on non-partisan officials in Wisconsin (See: Ford & Ihrke, 2018). Finally, when respondents were asked if the majority of their colleagues in their government share their definition of local control, 40.28 percent answered yes, 1.41 percent answered no, and 58.30 percent stated they were not sure.

Table Three: Summary Statistics for Continuous Variables

| | N | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|--------------------------------|-----|----------|-----------|
| Years in Position | 288 | 7.55 | 5.456 |
| Population | 288 | 42995.98 | 66591.61 |
| Shared Revenue Per Capita | 288 | 132.106 | 119.18 |
| Expenditure Per Capita | 288 | 1535.632 | 509.417 |
| Responsibility Distance Scores | 288 | 9.105 | 8.300 |

Respondents were also asked, “Who, in your experience, is currently responsible for the following functions/policy areas?” and “Who, in your experience should be responsible for the following functions/policy areas?” where 0 means the local government and 10 means the state government. In other words, the lower the number the more the respondent believes the issue is or should be a local function, and the higher the number the more the respondent believes the issue is or should be a state function. The specific policy areas listed were chosen in consultation with the previously mentioned pilot group who helped develop the survey. As shown in Table Four, Wisconsin local government leaders generally feel local government is most responsible for public safety and land use decisions, while taxation, higher education, and transportation are generally seen as state responsibilities. The areas that are most contested are K-12 education, election administration, racial equity, and public health and the COVID-19 response. A series of exploratory difference of means tests identifies areas where respondents differ in the level of government they think is, and should be, responsible for key policy areas. Respondents believe the state should be more responsible for public safety and election administration than they are now, but they also believe both should remain more of a local or shared function. Respondents believe land use decisions such as zoning, K-12 education, taxation, and higher education should have more local input than they do currently. However, respondents believe higher education should still be primarily a state responsibility.

Figure One



Results

We first explore how local government leaders define local control by examining answers to the open-ended question, “Based on your experience, how do you define local control in government?” Examining the open-ended responses will give some context to the models regarding definition alignment. The use of open-ended questions to tease out the range of understanding of a contested concept was used in previous research by Ford and Ihrke (2016; 2017). A coding of open-ended responses was conducted using a strategy based on an initial reading of all responses, the pre-emption epochs listed by Goodman, Hatch, and McDonald (2020), Richardson Jr.’s (2011) conception of autonomy and home rule, Perlman’s (2016) discussion of home rule, and consultation with the previously mentioned pilot group of Wisconsin officials.

All answers were coded into one of five categories. Tax and Spending contains answers that refer to taxation and spending, Unfunded Mandates contains answers that refer to mandates from higher levels of government, Land Use contains answers that reference zoning and/or planning, Classic Home Rule contains answers that refer to government form, Dillon’s rule, or local responsibility for solely local issues, and Autonomy contains answers that suggest complete autonomy for local government. Below are representative examples of answers in each category.

Tax and Spending

- The ability to levy taxes and determine the use of the levied dollars for local need.
- Ideally, a local government should have a free rein to tax transactions, incomes and property.
- We should be able to have total control over local budgets and procedures.
- Local control mean[s] you raise funds and decide what and where to spend.
- I see it as the ability of our county board -- of which I am a member -- to tax our citizens, spend tax dollars both local and those shared with us by the state and federal government in as independent a manner as possible.

Unfunded Mandates

- Locally, we are hamstrung in our spending by overly broad and restrictive legislative rules out of Madison, that were enacted after 2010.
- At the county level our local control is limited, we are for the most part an arm of state government.
- With what the state has done to the laws, we don't have much control.
- Local control is limited in government. We do have a say with our budget but very limited. It is all dependent on state aids as well as the levy limit that we are allowed to tax.
- I would define local control as municipalities' ability to make decisions without having limitations with state restrictions.

Land Use

- Generally, it has meant only zoning type of control
- Zoning
- Appropriate local units of government making decisions over use/zoning/shoreland issues.

Classic Home Rule

- Local elected officials exercise prerogatives that directly affect their constituents.
- Being able to make policies for our local county and citizens. Letting those who live here make decisions that affect what we do and how we live.
- Simply put, local control provides towns, villages and cities with the ability to make decisions regarding issues important to a well-functioning local unit of government, or to provide valuable input into an established decision-making process which is managed by the State.
- The areas of regulation that elected City/Village/Town officials can legislate on and the powers that they can exercise, that fall within the what is permitted by State and Federal law.

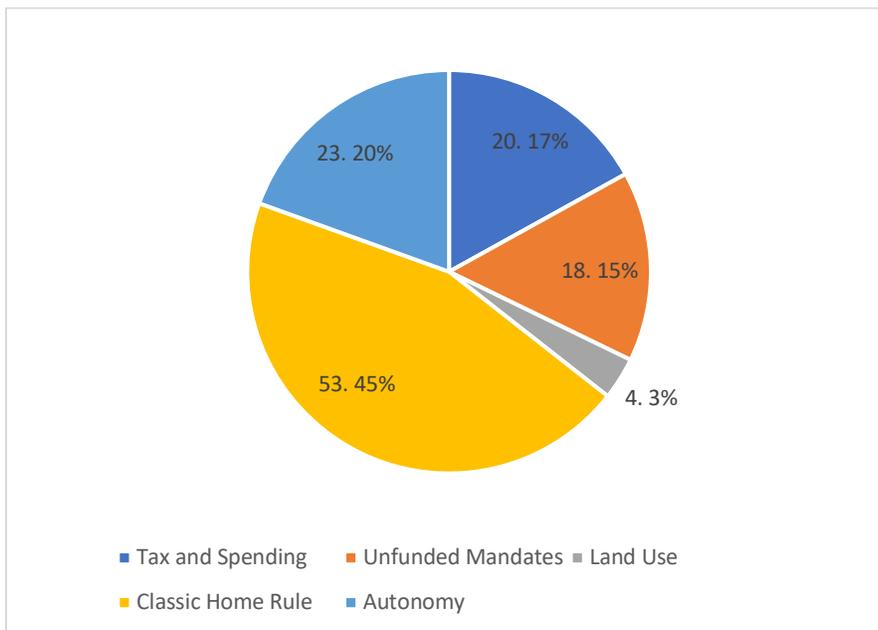
- Decisions for the community are made at the lowest level of government possible. The elected board of the community is able to make decisions that impact their communities.
- Whatever the federal and state idiot legislators leave us

Autonomy

- Control over our community.
- I would define local control as municipalities’ ability to make decisions without having limitations with state restrictions.
- All decisions are made locally. If the public doesn’t like what decisions we make they will vote us out of office.
- Taking care of ourselves.

As displayed in Figure Two, a slight majority of respondents give a definition of local control that is rooted in the idea of Home Rule and delegated and implied powers. However, significant numbers of respondents view local control through the lens of mandates, land use rules, and tax and spending control. A small but not insignificant number of respondents, define local control as a call for limited interactions with any higher form of government. Another way to divide the answers is that the 53.45 percent who give a Classic Home Rule Definition see local control as active, i.e., being able to use power as defined or delegated, whereas the other 46.55 percent define local control as passive, i.e., through limits placed by higher levels of government. Overall, these descriptive results show there is no single definition of local control; it is a term whose definition is in the eye of the beholder.

Figure Two: Respondent Definitions of Local Control



We explore the areas in which there are disagreements regarding local control with an OLS regression model predicting Responsibility Distance Score (Distance Score). The Distance Score is calculated by first determining the distance between who respondents think is responsible for each key function/policy area and who respondents think should be responsible for each function/policy area (see Figure One). The differences are then pooled in an additive index with a Cronbach's Alpha of .70. The larger the value, the larger the perceived disconnect between the level of government respondents think is responsible for a key function/policy area, and the level of government respondents think should be responsible. Thus, the variable is not a measure of who each respondent thinks is responsible for each key function/policy area, but rather a global measure of how much each respondent thinks there is an imbalance in state and local control.

The model presented in Table Four meets all regression assumptions. However, overall explanatory power is low, with an r-squared statistic of .130. The model yields several statistically significant results. Respondents who were more likely to agree that local control has decreased over the past five years have higher distance scores. The longer one has served in their position actually decreased overall distance scores, however, the substantive impact is very small (each additional year of service decreases distance scores by .180).

The most substantively significant impact is ideology. Self-identified Conservatives have much higher distance scores than Liberals and Independents. Finally, belief that a respondent shares their definition of local control with their colleagues increases distance scores. Position characteristic, including whether a respondent works for a County or City and whether a respondent is an elected official or municipal employee do not have an impact. Neither do population nor municipal financial characteristics. Overall, ideology and perceived reduction of local control are the biggest drivers of a perceived imbalance in state and local control.

Table 4: OLS Model Predicting Responsibility Distance Score

| VARIABLES | (Model 1) Distance score |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Local control decreased (5 years) | 1.378* (0.569) |
| Works well w/ state | -1.015 (0.647) |
| Municipal employee | 1.762 (1.141) |
| County government | 0.721 (1.339) |
| Years of service | -0.180* (0.0878) |
| Shared revenue per capita | 0.00309 (0.00493) |
| Conservative | 5.507*** (1.547) |
| Log population | 0.0606 (0.397) |
| Expenditures per capita | 0.000197 (0.00103) |
| Shared definition w/ colleagues | 2.092* (1.009) |
| Constant | 5.690 (5.652) |
| Observations | 288 |
| R-squared | 0.130 |

Standard Errors in Parentheses

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table Five contains the logistic regression results for a model predicting whether a respondent answered yes to the question, “Do you believe the majority of your employees/colleagues in your government share your definition of local control?” As in the previous model, the logistic regression model includes variables measuring government structural characteristics as well as respondent position characteristics and perceptions of local control. The results indicate that respondents who agree that local control has decreased over the previous five years and respondents who agree their government works well with overlapping governments are more likely to believe their colleagues share their definition of local control. Government employees (as opposed to elected officials) and Conservatives are also more likely to believe their colleagues share their definition of local control. Finally, respondents working in municipalities with higher shared revenues per capita are more likely to perceive a shared definition. Overall, Model Two shows that ideology, perceived decrease in local control, being an employee as

opposed to an elected official, and financial support from higher levels of government all shape perceived agreement with colleagues.

Table 5: Logistic Regression Predicting Perceived Definition Agreement

| VARIABLES | (Model 2) Shared Definition |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Local control decreased (5 years) | 0.390* (0.169) |
| Works well w/ state | -0.180 (0.187) |
| Works well w/overlapping | 0.495* (0.192) |
| State as partner | 0.213 (0.185) |
| Overlapping as partner | 0.148 (0.206) |
| Municipal employee | 0.626* (0.317) |
| County government | 0.298 (0.380) |
| Years of service | 0.0285 (0.0252) |
| Shared revenue per capita | 1.522** (0.447) |
| Conservative | 0.00235* (0.00139) |
| Log population | -3.35e-05 (0.113) |
| Expenditures per capita | -0.000386 (0.000311) |
| Constant | -4.695* (1.840) |
| Observations | 285 |

Standard Errors in Parentheses

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

The results of an ordered logistic regression model predicting the extent to which respondents agreed, on a five-point Likert scale, with the statement “State and local government actors define local control in a similar manner” are displayed in Table Six. Respondents who were more likely to agree that local control decreased in previous years were less likely to agree that state and local government actors define local control in a similar fashion. Respondents more likely to agree that their government’s powers are well defined, those working in county government, and those with higher amounts of shared revenue per capita were also less likely to agree that state

and local government actors share a common definition of local control (however, the impact of revenue per capita is relatively small). Overall, the findings show that perceived loss of local control, even when powers are perceived to be well defined, decrease perceptions of definition agreement between state and local actors. Also, county officials, who in many aspects serve as an intermediary between the state and service delivery, are less likely to perceive definition agreement.

Table 6: Ordered Logistic Regression Predicting Perceived State and Local Agreement

| VARIABLES | (Model 3) State and Local Agreement |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Local control decreased (5 years) | -0.734*** (0.139) |
| My government powers are well defined | -0.290** (0.145) |
| Municipal employee | 0.175 (0.253) |
| County government | -0.669* (0.323) |
| Years of service | 0.0105 (0.0201) |
| Conservative | -0.414 (0.351) |
| Shared revenue per capita | -0.00270* (0.00114) |
| Log population | -0.0626 (0.0939) |
| Expenditures per capita | 0.000368 (0.000263) |
| /cut1 | -6.766*** (1.319) |
| /cut2 | -4.307*** (1.274) |
| /cut3 | -2.477** (1.258) |
| /cut4 | -0.0856 (1.297) |
| Observations | 287 |

Standard Errors in Parentheses

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Discussion and Conclusion

The presented analysis shows that local control remains an ambiguous concept in Wisconsin local government. Conservative ideology increases dissatisfaction with the status of local control over key policy areas and makes it more likely to perceive one's colleagues agree on the definition of local control, but it does not influence perception of alignment between state and local definitions of local control. In other words, ideology impacts how respondents view their colleagues and their policy responsibilities. It also appears there is a rally around the flag effect, as a belief that local control has decreased over the previous five years increases alignment regarding local control across the board. Finally, position characteristics, such as being an elected official as opposed to a municipal employee, influence perceived agreement with colleagues, but they do not influence perceptions of local control in key policy areas.

Perhaps more importantly, the open-ended responses show wide variation in how local government leaders define local control. To gain more insight into how respondents think about local control, we ended the survey with an open-ended question: "Is there anything else you would like to say about local control?" Many responses dealt with specific policy issues, such as zoning, water quality, racial equity, and the state's COVID-19 response. However, the most consistent theme was a belief that local control is a politically weaponized concept. Representative responses are listed below in order to provide context to the results:

- It sounds great but is not realistic because politicians use it to persuade constituents that they are voting the right way.
- The desirability of local control over specific issues is subject to change.
- It is common to parrot the phrase "local control" while removing authority from Madison.
- Local control is a function of fiscal control.
- Legislators are more than willing to say they are for local control but it really means nothing to them.
- Local control is a moving target based on the hot regulatory items of the day.
- I think it's a fallacy.

Our framework posits that definition alignment around potentially ambiguous concepts is necessary to make those concepts meaningful in the governing process. Hence, the variety of definitions shared by local officials is problematic. Governing in a federalist system is disjointed if power boundaries are ambiguous or amorphous. Of course, vertical federalism, i.e., the relationship between state and local government, is constantly shaped by changing case law and political dynamics (and is given ample attention in the literature). However, as the presented results indicate, there are significant ambiguities and disagreements among local actors as to where their power lies and how their understanding of local control aligns, or does not align, with that of colleagues.

More simply, local governing actors are not on the same page regarding the meaning of local control. As such, it is little wonder that the open-ended responses reflect a general pessimism

regarding local control as a practically relevant governing concept. Instead, it is viewed by many local officials as a buzzword used to justify political action. Accepting local control as a politicized rhetorical device means dismissing its relevance to the day-to-day task of governing. Of course, the division of powers between state and local of government does have meaning. City managers and mayors need to understand their authority in order to provide services. Elected officials must understand local powers to provide direction to city staff.

However, the ambiguities at the boundaries of local authority create confusion when contested among governing actors at the local level. Meaningful local action on emerging and fast-moving issues, like the COVID-19 response, are hampered when actors do not coalesce around a common understanding of their powers and responsibilities. Basic governing questions, like who should be doing what and when, need to be answered and agreed upon by those actually governing before meaningful governing can occur. From a practical standpoint, local governments can incorporate the concept of local control into the strategic planning process and in the onboarding process for new staff and officials to create an organizational definition of local control. Having a clear definition will not eliminate policy disagreements and is subject to change over time, but it will at the very least solidify how municipal leadership understands local control at a point in time.

Ambiguous concepts like local control have meaning even when they are contested. However, the actionable potential of such concepts is limited when that meaning is not commonly understood or when it differs among those involved in the governing process. The presented results show that local officials have strong feelings about local control. But, when not defined, concepts like control and the opinions they stir can be weaponized as tools of political division, rather than as necessary prerequisites for quality governance.

Works Cited

- Blair, R. F., & Starke Jr, A. M. (2017). The Emergence of Local Government Policy Leadership: A Roaring Torch or a Flickering Flame?. *State and Local Government Review*, 49(4), 275-284.
- Bunch, J. (2014). Does local autonomy enhance representation? The influence of home rule on county expenditures. *State and Local Government Review*, 46(2), 106-117.
- Burke, B. F. (2014). Understanding intergovernmental relations, twenty-five years hence. *State and Local Government Review*, 46(1), 63-76.
- Cramer, K. J. (2016). The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker. *University of Chicago Press*.
- Ford, M. R., & Ihrke, D. M. (2016). School Board Member Definitions of Accountability: What are they, and Do they Impact District Outcomes? *Public Performance & Management Review*, 39(1), 198-222.
- Ford, M. R., & Ihrke, D. M. (2017). School board member definitions of accountability. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 55(3), 280–296.
- Ford, M. R., & Ihrke, D. M. (2018). The impact of Wisconsin’s Act 10 on municipal management in smaller municipalities: Views from local elected officials. *Public Policy and Administration*, 33(2), 170-189.
- Ford, M. R., & Ihrke, D. M. (2019). Perceptions are reality: A framework for understanding governance. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 41(2), 129-147.
- Goodman, C. B., Hatch, M. E. & McDonald III, B. D., (2020). State Preemption of Local Laws: Origins and Modern Trends. *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*. DOI: [10.1093/ppmgov/gvaa018](https://doi.org/10.1093/ppmgov/gvaa018).
- Howell-Moroney, M. (2008). The Tiebout hypothesis 50 years later: Lessons and lingering challenges for metropolitan governance in the 21st century. *Public Administration Review*, 68(1), 97-109.
- Ihrke, D. M., & Scott Niederjohn, M. (2005). Conflict on city councils in Wisconsin. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 27(4), 453-462.
- Johnson, T., & Ihrke, D. M. (2004). Determinants of conflict on Wisconsin town boards. *State and Local Government Review*, 36(2), 103-117.
- Julnes, P. D. L., & Holzer, M. (2001). Promoting the utilization of performance measures in public organizations: An empirical study of factors affecting adoption and implementation. *Public administration review*, 61(6), 693-708.
- Kettl, D. F. (2018). *The politics of the administrative process* (7th edition.). Thousands Oaks: SAGE.
- Kettl, D. F. (2018). Earning trust in government. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 24(3), 295-299.
- Lindblom, C. E. (1979). Still muddling, not yet through. *Public administration review*, 39(6), 517-526.
- McDonald III, B. D., Goodman, C. B., & Hatch, M. E. (2020). Tensions in state–local intergovernmental response to emergencies: the case of COVID-19. *State and Local Government Review*, DOI: 0160323X20979826.
- Mulgan, R. (2000). ‘Accountability’: An Ever-Expanding Concept? *Public Administration*, 78(3), 555-573.

- Nickels, A. E. (2016). Approaches to municipal takeover: Home rule erosion and state intervention in Michigan and New Jersey. *State and Local Government Review*, 48(3), 194-207.
- Olvera, J. G., & Avellaneda, C. N. (2017). Performance management in public administration. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- Park, S. (2018). The Impact of State-imposed Fiscal Rules on Municipal Government Fiscal Outcomes: Does Institutional Configuration Matter?. *State and Local Government Review*, 50(4), 230-243.
- Perlman, B. J. (2016). The Illusion of Local Control: The Paradox of Local Government Home Rule. *State and Local Government Review*, 48(3), 189-193.
- Poister, T. H., & Streib, G. (1999). Performance measurement in municipal government: Assessing the state of the practice. *Public administration review*, 325-335.
- Reed, D. S. (2001). Not in my schoolyard: Localism and public opposition to funding schools equally. *Social Science Quarterly*, 82(1), 34-50.
- Richardson Jr, J. J. (2011). Dillon's rule is from Mars, home rule is from Venus: Local government autonomy and the rules of statutory construction. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 41(4), 662-685.
- Schnabel, E. (2021). Local rebels: How local governments get around federal and state laws to resist new mosques. *Journal of Urban Affairs*.
- Sonenshein, R. J., & Hogen-Esch, T. (2006). Bringing the state (government) back in: Home rule and the politics of secession in Los Angeles and New York City. *Urban Affairs Review*, 41(4), 467-491.
- Stein, J., & Marley, P. (2013). *More than they bargained for: Scott Walker, unions, and the fight for Wisconsin*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Swanson, J., & Barrilleaux, C. (2020). State government preemption of local government decisions through the state courts. *Urban Affairs Review*, 56(2), 671-697.
- Wang, S., & Pagano, M. A. (2017). Cities and fiscal federalism in the trump era: a discussion. *State and Local Government Review*, 49(3), 184-198.
- Wood, C. (2011). Exploring the determinants of the empowered US municipality. *State and Local Government Review*, 43(2), 123-139.