# The Choice of Local Government Structure in Massachusetts: A Historical Public Choice Perspective*

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*Objective.* In a number of Massachusetts towns, voters have chosen to adopt a representative form of local government to replace the traditional open town meeting. The purpose of this paper is to examine this decision by incorporating the institutional details of the open town meeting with Sass' (1991) theories on the costs associated with different voting structures. One focus is the influence of interest groups under the different forms of government. In addition, this paper differs from previous studies in that it uses data from the time of the towns' decision. *Methods.* Hypotheses are formed on the effect of voter characteristics on the likelihood of adopting a particular form of local government. Estimation techniques including ordinary least squares, logit, and Tobit are used along with historical data to test these hypotheses. *Results.* The likelihood of a representative government increases with town population size, growth, and diversity. The effect of wealth is unclear. *Conclusion.* The empirical evidence, in general, supports existing theories on costs associated with different voting structures. However, the influence of community diversity may indicate that special interest groups have greater influence in a direct democracy than in a representative setting.

## Introduction

The open town meeting in Massachusetts is an example of direct democracy, with every eligible voter able to attend, speak, and vote on local municipal issues. This tradition dates back to the 1700s and is still the chosen form of government in the majority of Massachusetts towns today. According to Gere (1984), in 1821, the Massachusetts state constitution was amended to allow towns with a population of at least 12,000 to adopt a representative form of government[1]. In the decades that followed, a number of towns became cities. In 1915, Brookline became the first town to

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[1] In 1926, the population limit was lowered to 6,000. The following is a list of the years in which a town switched to a representative form (parentheses indicate the number of towns that changed their form of government in a year when more than one town did so): 1915,

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adopt a representative government without having become a city. This paper examines the demographic and socioeconomic factors that play a role in the decision to adopt a representative form of government.[2]

Considerations in the choice of voting rules are outlined in the public choice theories of Buchanan and Tullock (1962). These theories have received little empirical investigation in the literature, with the notable exception of the work done by Sass (1991; 1992). Building on the theories of Buchanan and Tullock, Sass outlines the determinants of voting structure rules and empirically tests the implications of his model. The purpose of this paper is to adapt Sass' model to the choice of local government structure for Massachusetts voters.

## Sass' Model

According to Sass, direct democracies involve two sets of costs for voters. The first set is made up of decision-making costs that include the costs of gathering information, debating issues, and voting. The second set results from individuals' attempts to transfer wealth through their votes. Changes in taxation and spending will benefit the majority at the expense of the minority. Sass argues that the resulting transfers are redistributional in nature but that the attempts themselves, as well as any preventative measures undertaken will require the use of resources and therefore should be included in the costs associated with voting.

With a representative form of government, the decision-making costs for the community fall. However, a new set of costs arise. Representatives, acting in their own self-interest, may choose a course of action inconsistent with the desires of their constituency. To minimize the costs resulting from such actions, individuals may expend resources to monitor the behavior of their representatives. Sass refers to the combination of costs created by undesired representative actions as well as monitoring costs as "agency costs." In addition to the emergence of agency costs, Sass argues that representative governments lead to an increase in wealth transfer costs. He

1916, 1919, 1920, 1921(3), 1922, 1926(2), 1927(3), 1928(2), 1929, 1930(2), 1931, 1933(2), 1934(2), 1936(3), 1938(2), 1943, 1948(2), 1950(2), 1952(2), 1953, 1955(3), 1956, 1959, 1963, 1969, 1970, 1971(2), 1973, 1974(2), 1976, 1978, 1989, 1992.

[2]There are four general forms of municipal government: the open town meeting (OTM), representative town meeting (RTM), town council (TC), and city. All cities changed directly from OTM, and all but three cities were formed prior to Brookline's pioneering change to RTM in 1915, with the latest city formed in 1921. Fifty-two towns changed from OTM to RTM, with four later changing to TC. One town changed directly from OTM to TC. Unfortunately, historical data are not available for a vast majority of cities; therefore the decision to become a city is not addressed in this paper either theoretically or empirically. For the four towns that have changed form twice, the first change (to RTM) is examined empirically. The town that changed directly to TC is also included, however; its omission would not change the signs or significance of any coefficients.

writes, "In direct democracies, the costs of coalition formation and vote trading are high, thereby reducing the likelihood of attempts to transfer wealth" (1991:76).

Because the transition from open town meeting to representative government involves an increase in some costs and a reduction in others, the willingness to make the change will depend on the voters' estimation of the subsequent changes in costs. Sass hypothesizes that community characteristics play a role in the determination of relevant costs and therefore influence the choice of voting structure. He tests the influence of the various costs by using the choice of government structure in Connecticut towns (Sass, 1991) and by examining the voting rules in condominium owners associations (Sass, 1992; Barzel and Sass, 1990). In general, the empirical results support the model.

In examining the choice of local government structure in Connecticut, Sass looks at four specific community characteristics. He first argues that in an open town meeting format, large populations will result in high decision-making costs and therefore, *ceteris paribus*, highly populous towns are more likely to use representative governments to reduce such costs. He goes on to argue that since changing governments is costly there may be a lag effect and quickly growing towns may not change their form of government immediately. In addition, Sass hypothesizes that since it is generally accepted that political participation increases with income, affluent towns are more likely to continue with open town meetings. Finally, the degree of heterogeneity will affect both decision-making costs and wealth transfer costs, leading to an ambiguous effect on the form of government. Sass uses a probit analysis and finds population and the rate of change in population to have the predicted effect on government choice. Income does not show a significant influence, while a greater standard deviation in income leads to a lower probability of representative government.

## Choice of Government in Massachusetts

Sass' model lays a strong foundation from which one can analyze the factors influencing the choice of government structure. What will be added to the picture are some of the institutional details of the workings of open town meetings and how these considerations will in turn influence the decisions of voters.

Gere (1984) points out that one reality of a typical Massachusetts open town meeting is that a low percentage of eligible voters actually attend. This leads to the problem of "packing." Gere writes, "OTM lends itself to manipulation by special interest groups, often town employees, whose members 'pack' particular sessions in order to pass or defeat certain articles affecting them personally" (p. 38). The financial decisions made at town meetings have an obvious and direct effect on town employees. Thus, these

employees have a strong incentive to form coalitions. The influence of municipal employee coalitions and unions on public employment, compensation and overall expenditures in city governments is well documented. See, for example, Gely and Chandler (1995), O'Brien (1994), and Mehay and Gonzalez (1994).

Of course, while employees seemingly have the strongest incentive to organize, other groups have incentives as well. Parents of schoolchildren may want school improvements, residents of a particular neighborhood may have an interest in road improvements, etc. The incentive for special interest groups to act collectively is the same regardless of whether or not the government is representative. However, the mechanism used to influence the outcome of decisions is more direct in an open town meeting format. If attendance at town meetings is low, then preformed coalitions may have a significant influence simply by attending the meetings. In representative town meetings, representatives are elected by geographic jurisdiction and are "not usually identified with a particular interest" (Gere, 1984:65). Thus, special interest groups may have more influence in open town meetings than in representative town meetings.

A second issue in the decision to change local government structure is the effect of such a change on the degree of voter representation and the subsequent effect on agency costs. Theoretically, in a direct democracy, all individuals participate and therefore the degree of representation is equal to one. Again, the reality of the poorly attended open town meeting is that many individual interests are not represented at all. In Massachusetts towns with representative governments, the number of representatives per town varies from 45 to more than 250 (Leviatan, 1984). Thus, when a representative government is adopted, the actual degree of representation does not fall as dramatically as one might assume.

These issues can be used, in conjunction with Sass' model, to predict the effects of town characteristics on the choice of local government structure. The first and presumably strongest influence on government structure choice will be the community's population size. Sass' argument is that towns with greater populations will have higher decision-making costs and therefore a greater probability of adopting a representative form of government. In addition, from a purely logistical viewpoint, it becomes difficult for large towns to carry on open town meetings because of the size limitations on meeting halls.

A second possible determinant of government choice is the local voters' income level. If political participation and interest increases with income, then citizens of more affluent towns are more likely to be content using the open town meeting format. In addition, a general increase in participation will reduce the influence of special interest groups and problems created by packing, adding stability to the open town meeting.

A third factor is the heterogeneity of the town population. Sass argues that diversity increases both decision-making costs and wealth transfer

costs, making it unclear which form of government will be chosen in towns with a heterogeneous voting population. However, as I have argued here, special interests' influence may actually be reduced in a representative setting, thereby reducing wealth transfer costs. Therefore, the effect of diversity on government choice is no longer ambiguous, as is illuminated by the following example. Suppose an open town meeting community that is very diverse in income levels and commitment to education is considering allocating substantial funds for school computers. People who feel strongly one way or another about the issue may spend resources in advance of the meeting by distributing information and encouraging those who feel the same way to attend the meeting. The resources expended are wealth transfer costs. The debate at the meeting will likely be heated and long (high decision-making costs). Such a community might be able to reduce overall costs by using a representative government. With "packing" no longer possible, those who feel strongly will simply inform their representative of their views and encourage others to do so. Thus resource expenditures (wealth transfer costs) may be reduced and decision-making costs will certainly be less.

Diverse views or a lack of what Schneider (1987) calls a "core of shared values" (p. 40) will lead to the problems described above. However, diversity in income alone can also increase both wealth transfer potential and subsequent resource costs. Schneider argues that since local property taxes are the main source of revenue for local public goods, to which all residents have equal access, there is an inherent redistributive nature to local government expenditures. In other words, the wealthiest residents pay for a higher proportion of shared goods and services. Schneider then argues that wealthier citizens will be more likely to oppose an increase in local government spending. Schneider's arguments can be applied to the decision on local government form. Opposition to increased expenditures will be greater in towns with higher variability in income. If special interest groups have greater success obtaining funding in an open town meeting setting, then, in economically diverse communities, citizens with above-average property values may prefer a representative form of government. This format may in fact reduce wealth transfers to special interest groups.

The final influence is that of town population growth. Sass' lag effect leads to the prediction that quickly growing towns are more likely to continue to use open town meetings. In addition, Farnham and Bryant (1985) argue that "[r]apidly growing communities are less likely to have stable, powerful interest groups" (p. 390). Thus packing may be less of a problem in such towns, and open town meetings may be efficient. However, citizens of growing towns may perceive newcomers to be different and view the population as increasingly heterogenous.[3] Finally, a town with slower

[3]Ideally, growth in population from immigration into a community should be separated out empirically. Unfortunately, available historical data does not contain this information. If one assumes fairly constant average birthrates across communities, then above-average population growth will come from immigration.

population growth may find it easier to adjust to changing needs and be less likely to view the population as suddenly reaching a point at which open town meetings are impractical. The combination of all these possibilities leads to an ambiguous effect of population growth on government structure choice.

## Empirical Tests

I have argued that the population, population growth, heterogeneity, and income level of a town will influence the likelihood of its adopting a particular form of government. I tested these hypotheses by using a variety of empirical methods. The first is a simple logit analysis using the form of government as the dependent variable. A problem arises, however, because using current demographic data to explain decisions which were made decades ago would be inappropriate. To take historical perspective into account, if a town has chosen a representative form of government, the data on population, income, etc., for the year the town changed its form of government is used in the measurement of independent variables. If a town currently uses the open town meeting, then 1990 demographic characteristics are used as independent variables.[4]

Because of the historical nature of the data, some adjustments were needed. First, since complete income data are not available for years prior to 1960, median housing values for all years are used instead, to capture the influence of income or wealth. These values were first transformed from nominal to real by using the consumer price index. However, because of the Massachusetts housing boom of the 1980s, real housing values for 1990 are significantly higher than in other census years for every town. Therefore, if real values are used as an independent variable explaining government choice, the results would show that high values are correlated with open town meetings. This is simply because if a town uses open town meetings, housing values for 1990 would be used as the independent variable. To circumvent this problem, wealth is measured as the median housing value in a town relative to the state average in the appropriate year.[5] Heterogeneity is measured by using the coefficient of variation in

[4] Other appropriate empirical techniques could incorporate data for towns in the years prior to the change in government form. For example, a panel logit equation could be used. However, severe data limitations preclude this. Old census reports do not include information for all towns. The towns in the sample used here were significantly populous, and therefore data were available.

[5] It could be argued that if the other variables grow over time, they too will show a misleading significant influence. To test for this, logits were run by using relative measures for all variables. The signs of the coefficients and levels of significance were the same as the results reported in Table 1 (with the exception that the "*t*" on population change in the third equation was significant at 5 percent instead of 1 percent). Results of these equations are available from the author on request.

housing values for each town in the appropriate year.[6] Population is measured by the number of town residents, and population growth is the average annual percentage change in population in the decade preceding the appropriate year. A complete explanation on data collection and measurement can be found in an appendix that is available from the author on request.

A logit analysis is performed by using the form of government as the dependent variable and town population, population change, heterogeneity, and wealth as the independent variables. To facilitate comparison to the original estimation by Sass, the results using 1990 data for all variables are also reported. The predicted effects were outlined in the previous section. The results are shown in the first two columns of Table 1.

The results of the first test indicate that population and heterogeneity have the predicted effects on government structure choice. Wealth does not

TABLE 1

Logit Analysis of Government Structure ($N$ = 178)

| Variable | Predicted Effect | Historical Data Coefficient | 1990 Data Coefficient | Historical Data Coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | | −10.096** | −2.729* | −28.487** |
| | | (5.66) | (1.65) | (6.15) |
| Population | + | 0.00013** | 0.00030** | 0.00018** |
| | | (3.49) | (5.85) | (3.54) |
| Population change | ? | 55.377** | −164.489** | 43.003** |
| | | (4.08) | (3.81) | (2.30) |
| Relative wealth | − | 0.6184 | −0.00002** | 2.6492[a] |
| | | (1.06) | (3.45) | (2.56) |
| Income heterogeneity | + | 14.221** | 2.8907 | 11.896** |
| | | (4.88) | (0.83) | (3.46) |
| Diversity index | + | | | 51.008** |
| | | | | (5.47) |
| Predicted correctly | | 79% | 87% | 85% |

NOTES: Absolute value of $t$-statistics are in parentheses.

Dependent variable = 1 if representative town meeting.

Dependent variable = 0 if open town meeting.

**Significant at the 1% level.

*Significant at the 5% level.

[a]Significant in the direction opposite of that predicted.

[6]The coefficient of variation was calculated from estimates of the standard deviation and mean by using frequency distributions. The midpoint of the top, open-ended interval was estimated by looking at the actual means (where available). Since the same top midpoint was used for all towns in a given year, the result is a slight downward bias of the CV when a town has houses with very high values and an upward bias when the town's highest values are only slightly above the lower limit of the top interval.

appear to have significant influence, while towns that have grown quickly show an increased tendency to change their form of government. The results shown in Table 1 also clearly indicate that the time at which the variables are measured does have a significant effect on the results. When 1990 data are used, the signs of the coefficients on both wealth and population change are the opposite of what they are when using historical data. In addition, heterogeneity does not show a significant influence when 1990 data are used.[7]

The first two columns of Table 1 facilitate comparison to the results found by Sass (1991). However, community diversity includes factors in addition to income diversity. Conflict arising from different preferences for local public goods may certainly have sources other than differences in income. Therefore, an additional measure of diversity should be used. To incorporate other measures of heterogeneity, an index similar to the one used by Sullivan (1973) is constructed. The formula used is $\text{Div} = 1 - (\Sigma Y^2/V)$, where $V$ is the number of variables used and $Y$ is the proportion of the population in a particular category of $V$. The diversity index used here contains five variables that capture occupational status, home ownership, race, ethnicity, and level of education.[8] As Sullivan writes, this index "is nicely interpretable in probability terms, since it represents the proportion of characteristics upon which a randomly-selected pair of individuals will differ, assuming sampling with replacement" (p. 70). As with our other variables, the index is measured in the closest year available to the year the town changed government, or in the case of those that did not change, 1990. A logit equation is used with the addition of the diversity variable. The results are shown in the third column of Table 1.

As predicted, the diversity index has a significantly positive influence on the probability that a town selects a representative form of government. An interesting side effect of the inclusion of the diversity index is that wealth now becomes significantly positive.

A second test of the influence of the town characteristics is also performed. It begins with the assumption that as population increases, holding population growth rate, diversity, and wealth constant, eventually the decision-making costs and practical considerations of where to hold meetings will

[7] Comparisons of my 1990 data results with those of Sass show the same results for population and population change as well as the same sign on wealth, although mine is significantly positive. (I use median housing values while Sass uses income.) My results show an insignificantly positive effect of the coefficient of variation in housing prices, while Sass's show a significantly negative influence, using the standard deviation of income. The difference in results could be attributed to income vs. housing values and/or Connecticut vs. Massachusetts.

[8] The following are the categories within each variable: Occupation—% white collar and % blue collar; Housing—% owner occupied and % renter occupied; Race—% white and % nonwhite; Ethnicity—% native and % foreign born; and Education—% with less than 9th grade, % with some high school, % high school graduates, and % with at least some college.

outweigh all other considerations and a representative form of government will be adopted. The population of a town when it changes government form is hereby referred to as the "threshold" population. Other town characteristics will affect this threshold population. For example, a diverse open town meeting community facing higher decision-making and wealth transfer costs would choose a representative government at a relatively lower population level than would such a town with less diversity. This is because total decision-making and wealth transfer costs associated with open town meetings would outweigh the agency costs associated with representative government at lower population levels than for a less diverse community.

Given these assertions, we can use a simple ordinary least-squares regression technique with threshold population as the dependent variable and population change, wealth, and diversity as independent variables. Because towns with open town meetings are excluded from this analysis, the problems associated with using real housing values no longer exist and these values are used.[9] Because the population limit was lowered from 12,000 to 6,000 in 1926, a dummy variable is also needed for those towns that changed government form prior to 1926. The results of the regression analysis are reported in Table 2.

In general, the results of this test support the results of the first test. The insignificance of population change is not a surprise in this case. If a town grew quickly, then the population when it changes government would be somewhat greater. This, combined with the result found earlier that quickly growing towns are overall more likely to change their form of government, leads to the insignificant result found here. Heterogeneity does reduce the threshold population as was predicted. Interestingly, real wealth does have

TABLE 2

Ordinary Least Squares Estimation of Threshold Population ($N = 53$)

| Variable | Predicted Effect | Coefficient | *t*-Statistic |
|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | | 29198.13** | 4.03 |
| Population change | ? | −14643.98 | −0.47 |
| Real wealth | + | 0.092561** | 3.83 |
| Income heterogeneity | − | −12478.83* | −1.90 |
| Diversity index | − | −42722.28** | −2.42 |
| Change prior to 1926 | + | 5674.276** | 3.49 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | | 56% | |

NOTES: Dependent variable is the population in year government changed.

**Significant at the 1% level.

*Significant at the 5% level.

[9]Using relative instead of real, the *t*-statistic shifted from 3.8 to 1.7.

a significantly positive influence on the threshold population. This result is as predicted but conflicts with the results of the logit equation.[10]

Finally, a third estimation technique is used. This empirical technique is concerned not only with whether a town adopts a representative form of government but also on the timing of a change if it occurs. The method used is a Tobit analysis. It follows closely the work of Jackson et al. (1994), who use a Tobit estimation to explain the factors affecting the timing and probability of states' adopting lotteries. The tendency of voters to change their local form of government is represented by the random variable $Y$. There is a critical value of $Y$, given by $Y^*$, such that if $Y > Y^*$, voters will choose to adopt a representative form. The period of time since a town has changed the form of government is represented by $T_i$. These variables are used in the following equations:

$$Y_i = \Sigma B_i X_i + \epsilon_i$$
$$Y_i = T_i \text{ if } Y_i > Y^* \text{ and } Y_i = 0 \text{ if } Y_i \leq Y^*$$

Following Jackson et al. and in keeping with the methodology so far used in this paper, the independent variables are measured at the time when the town changed government form. Once Tobit estimates of $B_i$ are found, two effects can be separated out by using the techniques outlined in McDonald and Moffit (1980). The first is the independent variables' effect on the probability that a town has changed its form of government. The second is the independent variables' effect on the timing of the change. Theoretically, the independent variables will affect the distribution of $Y$, or the tendency to change, and therefore influence the timing of the adoption. Table 3 shows the results of the Tobit estimation with the coefficients broken down into the timing and probability effects.

The results show that the signs of the coefficients and the level of significance are the same as the results of the logit equation reported in Table 1. An example of the interpretation of the results is as follows: for the average town an increase in population by one person advances the timing of the adoption of a representative form of government by .00048 years. Thus an increase by approximately 2,083 individuals will advance expected adoption by one year. In addition, an increase in population by one person increases the probability of adoption by .00002.

## Conclusion

The analysis has combined the theoretical costs associated with different forms of government with the institutional details of the open town meeting in Massachusetts. From this, a set of predictions was formed concerning the effect of town population, wealth, population growth, and heteroge-

[10] Park tests indicate the absence of heteroscedasticity.

TABLE 3

Tobit Analysis of Government Structure ($N$ = 178)

| Variable | Predicted Effect | Timing Effect | Probability Effect | $t$-Statistic |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Population | + | 0.00048 | 0.00002 | 3.52** |
| Population change | ? | 116.869 | 5.75497 | 2.84** |
| Relative wealth | − | 5.87525 | 0.28931 | 2.68[a] |
| Income heterogeneity | + | 48.3503 | 2.38092 | 5.67** |
| Diversity index | + | 164.143 | 8.08289 | 8.36** |

NOTES: Dependent variable = 1993 − the year of adoption (for towns that have adopted RTM).

Dependent variable = 0 for towns that use OTM.

**Significant at the 1% level

[a]Significant in the direction opposite of that predicted

Constant terms are not reported.

neity on government structure choice. Results of empirical tests are generally in line with the theory presented.

The various empirical tests give consistent results on all variables with the exception of wealth. In the logit equation, which includes the diversity index, relative wealth shows a significantly positive influence on the decision to adopt a representative form of government. The Tobit also shows that higher income increases the timing and probability of representative town government. However, wealth increases the threshold population. The reasons for these mixed results are unclear and may warrant further study.

The arguments presented here concerning the effects of heterogeneity diverged from previous theory. While previous studies predict an ambiguous effect, it was hypothesized here that increased heterogeneity will be associated with an increased probability and quicker adoption of representative governments as well as a lower threshold population. The empirical results support these predictions, giving some credence to the argument that special interest groups may have less impact in representative settings.

Finally, there is some evidence that growing towns may be more likely to change their form of local government. This may be due in part to increases in the perception of heterogeneity. It may also be that open town meetings more readily adjust to slow changes in population.

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