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An Alternative Approach to the Analysis of Citizen Assessments of Municipal Services

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In recent years, service delivery has become a central issue and problem in urban policy making. A frequently used approach to evaluating the quality of municipal service provision is the examination of citizen perceptions and evaluations of various services with the goal of identifying those factors which promote satisfaction.

Despite the great interest that this topic has attracted, analysts have been largely stymied in their efforts to develop theory to explain the nature and sources of citizen assessments of services. A review of the literature suggests four reasons for this result. First, only rarely has this research adopted a comparative perspective across cities. Second, while it is recognized that urban policy makers are responsible for the delivery of a wide range of services to the citizenry, empirical studies have focused primarily on a few of the most salient services (e. g., police, schools, etc.) and ignored more mundane activities such as street repair and animal control. Third, much of this literature relies on statistical methods which are relatively weak for the analysis of multivariate relationships — which the explanation of citizen service attitudes must surely be — and varies markedly in the selection of independent variables. Fourth, in general, empirical studies fail to investigate possible interrelationships underlying the evaluations of different services. Typically, little attention is devoted to integrating findings across services or to examining the services for similarities (and dissimilarities) which could be used to organize them into meaningful types. In short, previous research has yielded insight into assessments of particular services, but it has not moved toward a broader understanding of generic types of services.

I am currently undertaking research addressed to this intellectual lacuna. This research is guided by two fundamental hypotheses: First, citizen

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evaluations of services form meaningful clusters or dimensions of municipal policy performance along which urban decision makers can be rated. Second, attitudes toward the different types of services will have different determinants. Accordingly, the research agenda consists of efforts to (1) classify municipal services into meaningful types, (2) explain citizen attitudes toward each type, (3) compare the results across service types, and (4) replicate the analysis across cities.

To this point, inquiry has concentrated primarily on delineating types of municipal services from the citizen perspective. Empirical results based on a 1978 survey of citizen assessments of twelve services in Norman, Oklahoma, a medium size, suburban city, are encouraging. A full range of city services from police to libraries constitute the focus of investigation. Interrelationships between the evaluations of the various services have been examined according to conventional scaling techniques such as cluster analysis and factor analysis. All methods show a clear structure underlying the evaluations consisting of three dimensions: "health and safety" services (e. g., fire, police, etc.); "street-related" services (e. g., street construction, storm drainage, etc.); and "amenity" services (e. g., parks, libraries, etc.). These findings offer support for the first hypothesis: The dimensions constitute coherent, functionally similar areas of service provision which can alert urban policy makers to adequacies and inadequacies in the delivery of services to the populace.

Research is proceeding to account for citizen attitudes toward the three types of services. Although they must be considered tentative, preliminary empirical findings based on multivariate analysis suggest that the service dimensions are characterized by different determinants. Conceptually, this hypothesis seems persuasive: One would expect that the explanation of evaluations of services which citizens have great latitude to use or ignore in the enjoyment of leisure time (amenity services) may differ from that of assessments of services which cannot be avoided in travel throughout the city (street-related services) and may differ still from that of attitudes toward services which meet vital personal needs for protection and survival (health and safety services). Recognition of the qualitative differences between types of services may help to integrate apparently anomalous findings encountered in previous research arising from the working assumption that evaluations of all services have common sources. For purposes of theory construction, a multidimensional conceptualization of service attitudes represents a promising new departure.

In the future, this investigation will turn to replication across cities. It would be significant to find that citizen assessments of municipal services

display an underlying similarity in dimensional structure across varying locales and are not context-specific. This finding would dramatically increase confidence in the existence of relatively enduring types or dimensions of services around which explanatory theory may be fruitfully developed. On the other hand, if the dimensional structure is found to differ markedly across cities, analysis must be undertaken to explain these differences. Hopefully, the results of this analysis will point to those characteristics pertaining to the context of the city itself which are important for understanding citizen evaluations of municipal services.

Unfortunately for the conduct of comparative research, relatively few studies have canvassed citizen assessments of a broad range of city services, as the present design requires. Nevertheless, survey data collected by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research concerning racial attitudes in fifteen American cities (1968) and by the ten Urban Observatory cities regarding attitudes toward urban problems (1970) seem useful. In light of the general lack of the necessary information as well as the somewhat dated nature of available data, a major project devoted to original data collection is under consideration.

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