



**POLITICS IN SMALL TOWN ILLINOIS:  
IS IT SIMILAR TO CHICAGO AND ILLINOIS STATE  
GOVERNMENT?**

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## Abstract

Big city politics have been studied extensively, but little is known about the nature, extent, and impact of patronage in small town America. The purpose of the current study was to (a) conduct a cross-sectional, exploratory analysis of the nature and extent of political influence in small town Illinois, and (b) to determine whether the individualistic political subculture that Elazar (1972) ascribes to Illinois is evident throughout the state in the smaller towns and cities. The current study is significant because it fills an obvious gap in the literature.

A convenience sample ( $n = 555$ ) was used as the sampling frame, and participants self-selected for inclusion in the survey. A 22.7% response rate yielded a useable sample size of  $n = 126$ . The analysis relied upon descriptive and inferential statistics using cross tabulations and chi-square analysis.

The study found that patronage, political influence, and wrongdoing are at play in small town Illinois, but not overwhelming so. Although elected officials were generally supportive, political influence was evident. Overwhelmingly, administrators indicated that they had no relationship to elected officials other than a professional working relationship. Employees, however, had a variety of close relationships with elected officials and, at times, were inclined to use those relationships to interfere in the administrator's domain.

The study also concluded that there was sufficient circumstantial evidence to suggest that smaller towns in Illinois do not share the same individualistic political culture and behaviors as Chicago and Illinois state government. This finding is contrary to what would be expected from Elazar's typology of political cultures.

Politics in Small Town Illinois:  
Is It Similar To Chicago And Illinois State Government?

By Dwight Gard and David Hamilton

For many people, patronage is an antiquated political concept, imbued with an unsavory reputation for its corrosive influence on an otherwise principled form of government. Patronage was presumed to have been duly exorcised through the passage of federal and state legislation intended to establish civil service systems based on merit rather than patronage and a series of cleansing edicts by the Supreme Court between 1976 and 1996. However, patronage persists as a tool of political influence. A national survey (Smith, 1998) of municipal and county chief executive officers showed that patronage existed in 15.7% of local governments.

Even though political influence and its effects have permeated government administration from the beginning, very little systematic research has been done on patronage. As early as 1960, Sorauf (1960) noted that, "Very few studies exist of the actual operation of patronage systems across the county . . . In the absence of specific reports and data, one can only proceed uneasily on a mixture of political folklore, scattered scholarship, professional consensus, and personal judgment" (p. 28). Even after almost fifty years since Sorauf's statement, Bearfield (2009) makes a similar observation, noting that:

We still know very little about the functions of patronage. It is perhaps one of the great ironies of the study of American public administration that patronage — one of the core phenomena and concepts in the development and status of the field

— has received so little attention from students of public administration in recent years (p. 64).

Because Chicago politics were at the epicenter of patronage abuse, it is not surprising that much of the patronage research was focused there, followed closely by the political machines of New Jersey and New York (among others). For those studies, anecdotal research based on individual case studies was the primary methodology, negating the ability to generalize the findings. In addition, as noted by Tolchin and Tolchin (2010), in the world of academia, “there is no more pejorative epithet than ‘journalistic’. To the cognoscenti, that is often code for superficial, anecdotal, and unreliable” (p. xii).

Although big city political machines have been studied extensively, little is known about the nature, extent, and impact of patronage in small town America. In addition to the lack of research on the nature of political influence in small towns, there is scant research on patronage based on cross-sectional research designs. Without statistical inference, it is difficult to gain the insight needed to understand the nature of and conditions under which patronage thrives, and to generalize those results to a larger context.

Only two patronage studies (Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, & Vishny, 1997; Smith, 1998) were identified in the literature that used a cross-sectional research design. Both studies employed a very large sample size and included municipalities with a broad range of population sizes. Although neither study focused specifically on small town America, the size of the sample would have certainly included many small governments. Neither of those two studies sought to identify differences in patronage between large

cities and small cities or towns. Both studies relied upon statistical methods, which allowed the results to be generalized to a larger context.

The distinction between actual patronage and perceived patronage can be elusive, but the mere perception of patronage could be just as damaging. The perception of patronage depends on the level of trust — lower levels of trust suggest that the “grey areas” of patronage are likely to be interpreted in a negative way (“Bureaucratic Patronage,” 2004). Tolchin and Tolchin (2011) suggest that, “traditional patronage often crosses the line into corruption because the opportunities that present themselves are often too tempting to ignore” (p. 34).

Opponents of the classical spoils system denounce the practice because of the assumed inefficiency and corruption that could result from hiring persons who do not have the requisite skills or work ethic, or the use of kickbacks, fraud, and extortion (Bardhan, 1997). Such abuses would result in the loss of trust in government entities, possibly hampering the government’s efforts to recruit qualified candidates, and could have an adverse impact on employee morale and motivation. Tolchin and Tolchin (2011) contend that extending political favors is manipulative and interferes with a recipient’s ability to make independent decisions.

Those supporting patronage suggest that it does not deserve its reputation as being associated with corruption, inefficiency, lazy, incompetent public employees, and generally all that is wrong with government administration. Maranto (2001), an advocate for an at-will system at the federal level, argues that the federal bureaucracy during the Spoils Era was acceptably stable and competent. He claims that the spoils

system ensured that bureaucrats were responsive to the politicians and to the electorate, but they also cared about efficiently serving the public.

Proponents cite the benefits of fresh thinking that come from periodic turnover in personnel, the efficiencies gained by avoiding protracted recruiting and hiring procedures, and the unwavering loyalty of those chosen for the jobs (Feeney & Kingsley, 2008). Political appointments contribute to the agenda of the elected officials. In this context, politicians need assurance that workers are unequivocally in their corner. Many managers have complained that the anti-patronage procedures that have been forced on them are worse than the patronage system they replaced (Hamilton, 2002).

In a cross-sectional research design, Smith (1998) studied the use of patronage in a post-*Rutan* legal environment. Although the study had a large sample size ( $n = 1288$ ), the study did not specifically address the dynamics of small town patronage. Smith (1998) concluded that the persistence of patronage was linked to a history of traditional political organizations (culture), partisan elections, public's attitude of indifference toward government, an environment of low trust, highly competitive political system, and a nonpartisan council-manager form of government. We want to pursue and elaborate on Smith's findings relative to Illinois and particularly small town government in Illinois, testing the political behavior typology developed by Daniel Elazar (1972).

### **Political Culture, Patronage, and Illinois**

In the 1960s, Daniel Elazar (1972, pp. 94-97) developed a typology of political cultures to characterize the dominant political culture in each state. The three types of

political culture were described as traditionalistic, individualistic, and moralistic. A brief description of each culture follows.

In a moralistic culture, politics is seen as a public service, a quest for the good society. The central concerns are the public good, and what is in the public interest. Commitment to the public welfare is dominant in this culture. Politicians do not seek to enrich themselves, but desire to be public servants of the community. Politics is seen as a noble activity and public service is seen as a duty in which all citizens should be involved. Communitarianism is the predominant characteristic of this culture. Serving the community is the core of the political relationship and politicians are expected to adhere to it, even at the expense of individual loyalties and political friendships.

The traditionalistic culture accepts government as having a positive role in the community, but it should be limited to securing the existing social order. Politics in the traditionalistic culture confines political power to a relatively small elite group who either obtain their right to govern by their family ties, or because of their social position. This elite group views political parties as being of minimal importance because parties encourage a degree of openness that is not in accordance with the governing concepts of this group. Individuals expect to benefit from their political activity, but possibly more in terms of increased status and power than in monetary gain. The aim of the traditionalistic political culture is to maintain the status quo.

The individualistic political culture emphasizes private concerns. The private market is paramount in the individualistic culture. Politics is simply a means to facilitate private activities. Government action is mainly restricted to furthering private initiative and widespread access to the marketplace. Politics is viewed as a means by which

individuals can improve themselves socially and economically. Officeholders in this culture either commit themselves to providing high quality government services for the status and economic rewards considered their due (the high road), or they feel that their primary responsibility is to serve themselves and those who have supported them directly, favoring them even at the expense of the public (the low road). Political parties are important in this culture as a means of coordinating and controlling individual enterprise in the political arena. Politicians are interested in office as a means of controlling the distribution of favors or rewards of government rather than as a means of exercising governmental power for programmatic ends. The public accepts that politics is a dirty business that is better left to those who are willing to engage in it. A fair amount of corruption is accepted as a cost of doing business in the normal course of governing, but the public rebels when it feels that corruption has become too perverse. In this system, in which private concerns and the marketplace are emphasized, expanding government services is seen as granting favors to the public by the officeholders. Indeed, the concept of granting favors can permeate large parts of the bureaucracy as well. Although large segments of a bureaucracy may operate under a merit system, an entire organization can be affected by an environment that emphasizes political appointment at the upper levels of government, and which frequently manipulates the merit systems to meet political needs.

Using his typology, Elazar (1972) characterized each state as moralistic, traditionalistic, or individualistic. Although Elazar characterized some states as having blended cultures, he characterized Illinois as a state with a dominant individualistic political culture. His political cultures typology and state designations, postulated over



40 years ago, have been studied, criticized, added to, and used as the basis for studies attempting to explain political behavior. This typology is still an accepted construct and still has traction as a basis for studying political behavior.

In a further study of the Illinois city of Belleville, a medium-size city in the St. Louis metropolitan area, Elazar (1971) characterized the city as having a dominant individualistic political culture, but indicated that politicians have generally chosen the high road, which is to provide high quality government services for the status and economic rewards considered their due. Elazar also argued that Belleville had a strong traditionalistic political culture that tempered the role of the political party within the community and fostered an elitist approach to governing (Elazar, 1971). Elsewhere, Elazar (1970) maintains that the individualistic culture is operative throughout Illinois in most, if not all, of the counties and municipal governments. However, he concedes that there are moral enclaves and nonpartisan elections at the local level usually mask a strong party system that is indicative of the individualistic culture.

We argue that within an individualistic political culture, especially where politicians choose the low road — where the primary concern is self-interest and the interests of those who supported them directly, even at the expense of the public — is a culture that allows and even encourages patronage to exist and flourish. Indeed, we argue that political operatives within an individualistic culture can easily justify going beyond the simple and questionable unethical use of patronage into the realm of illegal actions. The individualistic political culture allows political operatives to justify using whatever means necessary to further their patronage designs. Seemingly with impunity, they can engage in “pay to play” politics, pinstripe patronage, ghost pay

rollers, illegally hiring unqualified personnel, doing political work during government hours, requiring employees to engage in political work during business hours, requiring political contributions, and other illegal actions. The traditional political culture also would encourage patronage with its paternal elitism, but probably not to the same degree as the individualistic culture. The blending of these two cultures would appear to be a perfect scenario for patronage to flourish and corruption to occur. A moralistic political culture eschews patronage in favor of a merit system.

Elazar (1994) concedes that it is dangerous to paint an entire state as heterogeneous as Illinois, with one designation. Indeed, in his discussion of settlement flows into the states, Elazar indicates that the southern section of the state was settled by people with a traditionalistic or individualistic culture, and the middle section was settled by people who were almost totally individualistic. The northern section is a combination of moralistic and individualistic, with the northwest and the extreme northeast sections (outside of Cook and DuPage County) having a blend of moralistic and individualistic cultures.

From the political behaviors observed within the major cities and governments in the state (Chicago, county-wide governments in Cook County, and the state government), it appears that Elazar's characterization was correct. Dirty politics, with its emphasis on patronage and corruption stemming from patronage, has been readily manifest in these big governments. However, does this designation generally apply to the entire state? Despite his differentiation of the high and low road in the individualistic culture, the direction for this culture is still dirty politics. Can the entire state be painted with the same pejorative brush used to describe the large governments in Chicago,

Cook County and state government? Do the political behaviors in smaller communities also exhibit an individualistic, or a blend of individualistic/traditionalistic political cultures, which accepts dirty politics and patronage? We believe this is not so, and suspect that Elazar was unduly influenced by politics in the larger cities in Illinois when he formulated his political typology, despite the very elaborate settlement patterns into the state and the cultural heritage they brought with them.

The purpose of this research is to explore the hypothesis that Elazar's individualistic characterization of Illinois does not apply to the small towns in Illinois. We hypothesize that small towns in Illinois exhibit a culture that is not individualistic, but are instead, more akin to a moralistic political culture where government is seen as a positive force, community service is a positive activity, and public service and carrying out the public will is more important than individual loyalties and political friendships.

### **Extremes of Patronage in Illinois**

Illinois state government and governments in Cook County were bastions of patronage and the major battleground of patronage opponents. Prominent U. S. Supreme Court cases that eliminated patronage played out in Illinois (for an analysis of the court cases, see Hamilton, 1993, 1999). The U.S. Supreme Court used a Chicago case to ban patronage in the hiring function (*Elrod v. Burns*, 1976) and a state of Illinois case (*Rutan v. The Republican Party of Illinois*, 1990) to essentially ban patronage during the employment relationship. In addition to the Supreme Court decisions, the *Shakman Decree*, a federal district court case, established a court-monitored hiring system for the city of Chicago, Cook County and other government signatories in Cook

County. Although the force of law technically prohibited patronage (except for some narrowly defined circumstances), instances of patronage persisted. For the most part, it was thought that patronage had been dramatically curtailed, although later evidence indicated that this was not so.

The state of Illinois, Chicago, and Cook County has recently been thrust in the limelight because of political scandals. We argue that the majority of the scandals and charges of corruption stem either directly or indirectly from the abuse of patronage, in either staffing or contracts for services provided to the governments. This corruption occurred despite an anti-patronage system at the city and county and legal prohibitions at the state level mandating that they desist in their patronage practices.

Patronage, for this article, is defined broadly as not just a hiring system, but as any kind of political influence on the workforce that leads to abuse of commonly accepted merit principles, and results in corrupt acts by employees. This includes bias in the letting of contracts (pinstripe patronage) to the extent that it impacts the workforce.

A culture of patronage survived and flourished, despite the court edicts and the court-monitored hiring system. Indeed, it appeared that the spoils system had been resurrected. Jobs were regularly subjected to political influence and employees were pressured to engage in political activities. Patronage practices were barely beneath the surface, and in many cases were so egregious that not only were there obvious ethics violations and betrayal of the public trust, but laws and processes were regularly flouted. Despite stringent anti-patronage provisions, determined and politically motivated people found ways to circumvent them. Candidates with political clout continued to receive

preference in hiring and promotion decisions. The anti-patronage processes were either ignored or falsified to ensure that favored candidates received jobs or promotions. Not only political appointees, but also members of the career bureaucracy, were involved in patronage abuses that led to violations of federal law, resulting in criminal prosecutions and convictions. We believe this is evidence of the individualistic political culture that Elazar identified.

Republicans and Democrats used and abused patronage for personal and political gain. In the case of George Ryan, he surrounded himself with people whose sole goal was to do whatever it took to advance his political career. As he was successful in obtaining political office, they enriched themselves. Apparently, the belief was that the ends justified the means. In violation of state laws, they put state employees to work on Ryan's campaign during working hours, used state equipment and supplies to reduce campaign costs, and pressured state workers to sell fundraising tickets to support Ryan's campaign.

To protect Ryan from negative publicity, they thwarted investigations by the Secretary of State's Inspector General's Office into wrongdoing and eventually eliminated the office. These actions might have been standard practice in the past, but they were clearly illegal and not acceptable in a post-patronage era with an aggressive U. S. Attorney.

In an individualistic political culture, the public accepts that politics is a dirty business and accepts a certain level of corruption. In this culture, determined politicians and their political appointees are able to abuse and corrupt a personnel system that has

few or no patronage prohibitions. The question we investigated is whether this type of culture permeates small town Illinois.

## **Sampling Frame and Participants**

The current study was a cross-sectional, exploratory data analysis designed to (a) explore the nature and extent of political influence in small towns and cities of Illinois and the impact on public administrators, and (b) to evaluate whether the individualistic subculture that Elazar (1972) ascribes to Illinois is evident throughout the state in the smaller towns and cities. A convenience sample was employed and the sampling frame was managers/administrators (or similar job title/function) for communities in the state of Illinois. The study relied upon access to membership lists provided by the Illinois City Manager Association ( $N = 260$ ) and the Illinois State Comptroller's Office, which lists all communities in the state. Participants who were elected officials, or had job titles not in consonance with focus of the study, were culled out, yielding a sample size of  $N = 555$ . Survey participation resulted in a useable sample size of  $n = 126$ , producing a 22.7% response rate. However, 13 participants did not finish the survey, completing only the first 15–18 questions. Partially completed surveys were retained for the limited data that was provided, which was mostly demographic in nature. In general, most inferential analyses were performed with a sample size of  $n = 113$ , although for some analyses the sample size was less because participants opted to skip some questions. The survey was administered online during the summer of 2012 using *Qualtrics Online Survey Software*.

## **Survey Instrument**

A 35-item survey instrument (see Appendix) was developed by the researchers. The majority of the questions provided multiple-choice responses, although several of

the questions involved Likert-scale response choices. Narrative responses were available on several of the survey questions. At the end of the survey, participants were given the option of offering open-ended narrative comments; 38 participants elected to do so.

Survey questions were grouped into three categories: (a) community demographics, (b) participant demographics, and (c) questions regarding political influence.

Community demographics included items such as:

- Population
- Type of community (rural, suburban, or urban)
- State in which community is located
- Ethnic composition of community
- Form of local government (council/manager, mayor/council, etc.)
- Political nature of community (partisan or non-partisan)

Participant demographics included items such as:

- Age
- Gender
- Education level
- General employment information (length of tenure, job description, etc.)

Political influence questions included items such as:

- Nature of political influence on job performance and their response to it
- Ethical and legal situations encountered
- Familiarity with relevant court decisions



- Effect of state of Illinois/Chicago politics on their job performance
- Similarity of local community politics compared to Chicago politics

### **Statistics and Limitations**

We tested the null hypothesis that the small towns and cities of Illinois share the same type of political subculture as the city of Chicago. As indicated above, Elazar characterized the state of Illinois as having a dominant individualistic political culture throughout the state, with little (if any) blending with either the moralistic or traditionalistic cultures. Indeed, if there was any influence from another culture, it was most likely the traditional culture with its elitist control, which when mixed with the individualistic subculture would appear to support a political patronage culture.

To evaluate the hypothesis, a number of cross tabulations were performed and tested for statistical independence using chi-square analysis. Cross tabulations were used to assess the relationship between various measures of political influence (dependent variables) and independent variables such as community size, type of community, form of local government, partisanship, ethnic composition, age, gender, level of education, etc.

### **Effect Size and Statistical Power.**

Effect size is designed to measure the practical significance of a result, i.e., the size of the phenomenon under study. A measure of effect size should accompany any statistical analysis, although many researchers fail to provide such measures. No

conclusions about the practical significance of a result can be inferred from a statistically significant finding (Ellis, 2010).

For the current study, effect sizes were calculated for all statistically significant findings. Cramer's  $V$  and the Contingency Coefficient are commonly used measures of effect size when using contingency table methods. Effect sizes are usually characterized as small, medium, or large, as suggested by Jacob Cohen (1988) in his seminal work on power analysis.

The statistical power of a test is the probability of correctly rejecting the null hypothesis when it is false. Insufficient statistical power can lead to ambiguous interpretations of a non-significant statistical finding. Lack of statistical significance may mean that no statistical relationship exists, or that there was insufficient statistical power to detect a small effect size. Cohen (1988) recommends that a statistical test should have statistical power of at least 0.80. For the current study, a power analysis showed that with a sample size of  $n = 113$ , medium effect sizes can be detected with power of 0.80 using contingency tables with up to 16 degrees of freedom, at an alpha of .05. Although, given the sample size, detection of small effect sizes cannot be achieved with power of 0.80, We believe that for the phenomena under study and the lack of precision in measuring subjective responses, a small effect size would be of little practical interest or consequence.

### **Contingency Table Cell Frequencies.**

The most commonly used rule for contingency table cell frequencies stipulates that expected cell frequencies should be at least five. However, a less stringent approach permits expected frequencies of at least five in 80% of cells in larger tables,

but no cells with an expected count of zero. Cochran (1952) states that if any expected cell frequency is at least one, or if more than 80% of the expected cell frequencies are greater than five, then the validity of the test should be tenable. Conover (1999), citing several unpublished theoretical studies, believes Cochran's rule to be overly conservative, and suggests that some expected cell frequencies can be as small as 0.5, provided that most are greater than one, without impacting the validity of the test.

The more conservative the approach for expected cell frequencies, the more difficult it is to reject the null hypothesis of independence among the categorical variables being tested. In situations where a chi-square test is statistically significant but the rule for cell frequency was violated, a reader should be cautious in accepting the result as statistically significant, especially if the result is borderline significant. Because of the theoretical support for the less conservative rule, a less conservative approach was used in evaluating the statistical significance of the cross tabulations in the current study.

Normally the remedy for inadequate expected cell frequencies is to combine categories into a fewer number of categories, resulting in larger expected cell counts. In general, for the current study, categories were combined where possible in order to increase the expected frequencies within cells. However, in some situations, combining categories diminished the desired granularity of what was being investigated. Because of the unique attributes of many of the question choices, combining categories was not always tenable.

For a number of dependent variables having a larger number of categories, data were heavily represented among only one or two of the categories. In such cases, categories with few observations were often combined into a single category.

### **Limitations.**

The methodology was subject to two primary limitations: (a) non-response bias, and (b) non-random sampling. Because participants self-selected for inclusion in the sample, non-response bias could affect the validity of the results because those who chose not to participate might be fundamentally different from those who did participate. In addition, due to self-selection the sample was not a true random sample. Therefore, the reader is advised to use some caution in generalizing the results.

These limitations notwithstanding, the study is still important and useful because political influence in small towns and cities in America has not been systematically studied. The results of the current study can be used to highlight the nature and extent of political influence across a broad stratum of community population sizes, and provide the impetus for other studies that will permit greater use of statistical inference.

As mentioned previously, the survey resulted in 126 total responses, with a 22.7% response rate. Because survey participants had the option of skipping questions, the number of participants varies from question to question. In addition, some questions instructed participants to “check all that apply”, which means that for some questions, the number of responses was larger than the number of participants.

## Participant Characteristics

Approximately two-thirds of the participants were male. The largest age group was the 46-60 bracket, comprising 53%. Approximately 87% of all participants were between 31 and 60 years of age, and 12% were over 60 years of age. Participants with college degrees accounted for 72% of the total, with 53% holding advanced degrees. Of those with advanced degrees, 76% percent held the Master of Public Administration degree. The vast majority of those with advanced degrees (85%) were employed in suburban/urban communities, while 86% of those without college degrees were employed in rural communities. Males were significantly more common in suburban/urban communities (71%), while females were significantly more common in rural communities (76%). Of those with advanced degrees, 91% were males. Of those without a college degree, 72% were females. In other words, females without college degrees dominated rural communities, and males with advanced degrees dominated suburban/urban communities. Males were 11.4 times more likely to have college degrees than females ( $OR = 11.4, p < .05, 95\% CI = 4.59-26.32$ ; large effect size,  $V = .511$ ). In addition, females were 7.9 times more likely than males to be employed in rural communities ( $OR = 7.9, p < .05, 95\% CI = 3.3-18.5$ ; medium effect size,  $V = .449$ ).

Almost 60% of participants described their job positions as “Manager” or “Chief Administrative Officer”. The lengths of time participants had been with their current employer were approximately evenly distributed among the five brackets ranging from “less than two years” to “more than twenty years”. Almost 62% of participants reported having lived more than ten years in their present community, with 39% living in their present community for more than 20 years.

Fifty-two percent of participants were hired from outside the community, and 63% reported that their most recent previous employment was in the public sector, with 36% coming from the private sector. Approximately 1% came from the non-profit sector. Compared to suburban/urban communities, rural communities were 14.7 times more likely to hire from within ( $OR = 14.7, p < .05, 95\% CI = 6.15-32.25$ ; large effect size,  $V = .583$ ).

When asked why they left their previous employer, 68% ( $n = 76$ ) left to pursue a better job opportunity, while 7% said they were fired. Only three percent of participants left their previous employer citing too much political pressure as the reason.

In summary, the “face” of the average small town administrator that emerged was someone who —

- Is most likely White
- In rural communities, is more likely a female Manager/CAO without a college degree
- In suburban/urban communities, is more likely a male Manager/CAO with an advanced degree
- Left their previous job to pursue a better job opportunity,
- In rural communities, was recruited from within the community
- In suburban/urban communities, was recruited from outside the community

## Community Characteristics

Communities were characterized as rural, suburban, or urban. Because urban communities accounted for less than 6% of the responses, urban and suburban were grouped together for analysis. Rural communities represented 45% of the responses. However, because participants self-described their community, the definition of “rural” can be highly subjective and ambiguous. In communities with population under 1,500, participants unanimously described it as rural. With population from 1,500 – 5,000, the majority (71%) described the community as rural. However, upon reaching a population of 10,000 – 25,000, three-quarters of participants described the community as suburban/urban. Beyond populations of 25,000, communities were almost unanimously described as suburban/urban. Based on the responses and for the purpose of this study, a reasonable operational definition for “rural” might be communities with populations below 10,000. This definition may not agree with the official U.S. government definition.

Ethnically, the vast majority (96%) of communities were described as “majority White”. Of communities having a significant proportion of minorities (i.e., defined by the researchers as more than 30%), 15% reported a dominant Hispanic minority, and 6% reported a dominant African-American minority.

In describing the form of community government, 85% of communities were either council/manager (38%) or mayor/council (47%). All other forms were grouped together as “Other”. Compared to rural communities, suburban/urban communities were 5.6 times more likely to have the council/manager form of government ( $OR = 5.56$ ,

$p < .05$ , 95%  $CI = 2.33-13.16$ ; medium effect size,  $V = .388$ ). In terms of partisanship, 88% of the communities were characterized as non-partisan.

### **Political Influence**

In terms of the breadth of managerial authority, approximately 80-85% of participants ( $n = 81$ ) said they had the authority to hire, fire, and promote, while 74% indicated they had the authority to issue contracts. The vast majority (96%) of participants ( $n = 109$ ) indicated they were not related in any way to any member of the governing body, while 53% of administrators said their employees had no relationship with the governing body. Employees having a relationship with the governing body were evenly distributed among biological/legal, friend/romantic, or business/professional categories. Because employees often had some type of relationship to the governing body, 52% of participants ( $n = 113$ ) said that their employees used this relationship to exert pressure on them to take actions contrary to their professional judgment. However, 42% of the administrators said they never succumbed to such pressures, while 15% indicated that they rarely or occasionally acquiesced to such pressures.

When asked to what extent participants ( $n = 113$ ) succumbed to pressure from elected members to do things or take action that they considered unethical or unprofessional, 38% said they were never pressured by elected officials. Of those who were pressured, half said that they had never succumbed, while 13% indicated that they rarely or occasionally succumbed to the pressure. When participants ( $n = 113$ ) were asked if they had ever uncovered or exposed illegal activity by an elected member of government, 81% indicated in the negative. The nature of the illegal activity that was



uncovered generally involved inappropriate use of government resources, theft or embezzlement, bribery and corruption, and conflicts of interest. The vast majority (88%) of participants indicated they had never resigned because of political pressure.

In terms of the political culture surrounding their work environment, only 10% of the participants ( $n = 113$ ) felt political leaders were too involved in administrative affairs. In general, though, 90% of participants ( $n = 113$ ) felt elected leaders were always or often supportive of them, allowing them to do their job in a professional manner.

When asked about their knowledge of recent patronage and pay-to-play politics in Chicago and the State of Illinois, 80% indicated some degree of knowledge about such activities. Lack of knowledge of these activities was concentrated in rural communities, which were 47 times more likely to have little or no knowledge compared to suburban/urban communities ( $OR = 47.3$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $95\% CI = 6.1-368.8$ ; large effect size,  $V = .517$ ).

When participants were asked to what degree they believed their local political climate was similar to the politics in Chicago, 83% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Only 7% agreed that their communities were politically similar to Chicago. However, from the narrative comments, the majority of the respondents indicated that the politics and corruption at the state and in Chicago had a negative impact on them. Comments such as the following were typical of the comments:

- Most suburban and downstate local governments operate under the culture of merit. It is unfortunate that the vast majority of public servants who are good and ethical must be viewed by the cynical public in the same tainted light as those who are actually corrupt.

- Residents will often have a fatalistic view about government corruption and assume village government is as corrupt as Chicago or Illinois. This is a level of cynicism that you have to break through.
- The culture of corruption in Illinois has diminished the public's opinion of government in general. It makes it more difficult to break through pre-conceived notions and assumptions the public makes and applies to government in general.

### **Cross Tabulations**

Cross tabulations were conducted (using chi-square analysis to test for independence) to assess the relationship between various measures of political influence (dependent variable) and independent variables such community size, geographic location, type of community, form of local government, ethnic composition, age, gender, level of education, etc. As mentioned previously, a preliminary power analysis showed that a sample size of  $n = 113$  was sufficient to detect a medium effect size (or larger) in contingency tables with up to 16 degrees of freedom, with power = 0.80 and an alpha of .05. Cramer's V and Contingency Coefficient were used as measures of effect size. The odds ratio was calculated when 2 x 2 cross tabulations were constructed.

Participants ( $n = 113$ ) were asked whether they felt political leaders were too involved in the day-to-day operations of the administrator, or whether they took a balanced approach to interacting with the administrator. The vast majority (90.3%) of participants perceived that political leaders took a balanced approach, with only 9.7%

believing that political leaders were too involved. A cross-tabulation of rural/suburban vs. political leader involvement was statistically significant, indicating that the two factors were not independent ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.83, p = .016$ ; small effect size,  $V = .227$ ). Rural communities were 8.9 times more likely than suburban/urban communities to perceive that political leaders took a balanced approach to interacting with the administrator ( $OR = 8.9, p < .05, 95\% CI = 1.1-72.0$ ).

The extent to which administrators experienced significant political interference that made it difficult for them to do their job in a professional manner was cross tabulated with community type (rural vs. suburban/urban). Because only three responses involved “Always” and “Often”, they were combined with the category “Occasionally” and contrasted with the response “Never”. A statistically significant result ( $n = 113$ ) was found, indicating the degree of political interference was not independent of the community type ( $\chi^2(1) = 13.69, p < .001$ ; medium effect size,  $V = .348$ ). Compared to rural communities, suburban/urban administrators were 4.5 times more likely to report occasional political interference ( $OR = 4.5, p < .05, 95\% CI = 1.98-10.20$ ).

Participants were asked to reflect on the fact Illinois (in keeping with Elazar’s individualistic subculture characterization) has been characterized as a state where people are cynical about government. Unethical politics are accepted as, “that’s the way things are, and that’s ok”, and professional administration is of a lesser concern. They were then asked to consider to what extent their local community government could be similarly characterized. Participants holding a neutral position were excluded ( $n = 11$ ) so that those who agree/disagree ( $n = 102$ ) could be contrasted and cross-

tabulated with community type (rural vs. suburban/urban). The cross tabulation produced a non-significant result ( $\chi^2(1) = 1.05, p = .306$ ; small effect size,  $V = .101$ ). Because of the lack of statistical power (observed power = .17), it is not clear whether non-significance was due to lack of power or a true, non-significant result. That issue notwithstanding, the non-significant result does serve to support the hypothesis being evaluated in this study, which will be elaborated on in the Discussion section.

Participants ( $n = 113$ ) were also asked to consider to what extent the political atmosphere, the exercise of patronage, pay-to-play politics, and exposed corruption in Illinois state government (and Chicago) affected their ability to carry out their duties in a professional manner. Because only eight responses involved “Always” ( $n = 2$ ) and “Often” ( $n = 6$ ), they were combined with the category “Occasionally” ( $n = 49$ ) and contrasted with the response “Never” ( $n = 64$ ). The “Illinois/Chicago effect” was cross-tabulated with community type (rural vs. suburban/urban) to test for statistical independence between the two factors. The test was statistically significant, indicating that the Illinois/Chicago effect was not independent of community type ( $\chi^2(1) = 9.98, p = .002$ ; medium effect size,  $V = .297$ ). Compared to rural communities, suburban/urban administrators were 3.6 times more likely to perceive the occasional Illinois/Chicago effect ( $OR = 3.6, p < .05, 95\% CI = 1.60-7.94$ ).

To revisit and sharpen the focus on several questions of political influence, the population size dichotomy (small/large) was re-stratified ( $n = 113$ ) such that “small” was defined as towns with populations not exceeding 5000. Towns with populations greater than 5000 were combined and classified as “large”.

On the issue of whether political leaders were too involved in the day-to-day operations of the administrator, there was a significant difference between small towns and large towns ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.68, p = .010$ ; small to medium effect size,  $V = .243$ ). The vast majority of participants (90.3%) believed that political leaders took a balanced approach to their involvement in day-to-day operations. Of the small minority (9.7%) of participants who felt that political leaders were too involved, all were from large towns. None of the small town administrators believed that political leaders were overly involved.

Regarding political interference by elected officials, there was a significant difference between small towns and large towns ( $\chi^2(1) = 9.30, p = .002$ ; small to medium effect size,  $V = .287$ ). Although 56% of participants said there was no political interference by elected officials, of those indicating there was political interference, larger towns were 3.64 times more likely than small towns to indicate as such ( $OR = 3.64, p < .05, 95\% CI = 1.55-8.55$ ).

With respect to the “Illinois/Chicago effect”, there was a significant difference between small towns and large towns ( $\chi^2(1) = 10.97, p = .001$ ; medium effect size,  $V = .312$ ). Compared to small towns, larger towns were 4.2 times more likely to report that their communities were affected by the patronage behaviors practiced in Chicago and the State of Illinois government.

After re-stratifying the population data, the fundamental relationships of the three phenomena remained the same, although the magnitude of differences varied slightly. Compared to small towns, larger towns tended to experience more political interference,

felt that politicians were too involved in the day-to-day operations, and were more likely to be affected by the Illinois/Chicago effect.

## **Discussion**

We speculated that the political subculture in smaller towns might be different from the political subculture that Elazar ascribed to the state as discussed above. We speculated that it might tend more toward the moralistic subculture, which is more altruistic — emphasizing the common good over self-interest, and having a disdain for dirty politics.

The null hypothesis posits that the small towns and cities share the same political subculture as is evident in the patronage and corruption of Chicago and Illinois state government. Although no single statistical test was employed to test the hypothesis in the usual sense, inferential statistical analysis of a variety of survey responses was used to see if there was sufficient “circumstantial” evidence to suggest that the subculture might be different. If a sufficient number of participant responses differed from what would have been expected from an administrator in the Chicago area, this was taken as evidence that the subculture might be different. In essence, we used the “preponderance of evidence” criterion to build a circumstantial case against the null hypothesis.

Perhaps the strongest indicator that the local political subculture was different from the Chicago or state government culture was that 83% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed their community was politically similar to Chicago. Ten percent of participants were neutral on this issue. Only 7% agreed their communities were politically similar to Chicago. Because the data did not provide a specific geographic

location within Illinois, the 7% who indicated that their communities were politically similar to Chicago, might have been in close proximity of Chicago, and hence shared a common political subculture; or, these few communities were sufficiently beyond the influence of Chicago, but still exhibited an individualistic political subculture. Although the data are insufficient to resolve this ambiguity for this small minority of communities, the evidence, in general, supports the idea that the political subculture is different from Chicago.

A cross tabulation between community type (rural vs. suburban/urban) and the question of whether the local community was perceived as similar to Chicago indicated there was no statistically significant difference ( $p = .436$ ) between the response of rural participants compared to suburban/urban participants. However, in consonance with the previously mentioned finding that 83% of administrators did not consider their local politics to be similar to Chicago, this non-significant result provides additional evidence the political subculture of small towns and cities is different from Chicago. If the suburban/urban communities were significantly different from the rural communities, one might reasonably infer that suburban/urban communities might have a political subculture similar to Chicago. However, this non-significant result suggests that both types of communities had political subcultures that were different from Chicago, and most likely similar to each other.

It would be naïve to presume that any community would be free from political influence. The salient point, however, is to what extent and how often political influence was exerted, and to what extent an administrator was able to resist this pressure without being fired. In Chicago-style politics, an appointed administrator's failure to

acquiesce to political pressure might be considered an ungrateful gesture at the least, and treasonous in the extreme — a politician’s largess is meant to create certain psychological “obligations” on the part of an administrator. Survey results showed that this obligation was not strong, as 38% of the participants indicated that they were never pressured, and of those who felt some measure of political pressure, half felt “safe” enough, politically, to reject what was being asked of them. When acquiescing to the political pressure, participants indicated this happened rarely, or occasionally at worst. This result seems mild compared to what one would expect if engaged in the “hardball” politics of Chicago. This seems to support the notion that the political subculture was fundamentally different.

Administrators overwhelmingly (97%) reported, they never experienced political interference, or at the worst, occasionally. Political interference is different from political pressure. Interference could simply be an elected official wanting to be too “hands-on” in the day-to-day operations of administration. In small communities, an elected official who is a long-time resident of the community, may feel they have more knowledge about how “things are done” than a recently hired administrator. Despite the benign, well-meaning intentions of the elected official, an administrator might still resent this type of intrusion into their professional domain. In Chicago, one might expect this type of intrusion and interference to occur with greater frequency. Because only a very small minority of administrators experienced this type of interference, one could reasonable infer that the subculture is different.

Because only a small minority (10%) of participants felt political leaders were too involved, the vast majority (90%) felt these leaders allowed administrators a great deal



of autonomy. This level of autonomy would not be expected within Chicago-style politics, where patronage may, in most cases, trump professional administration. This professional administration orientation provides additional evidence the political subculture is different. Because precise geographic location within Illinois was not available, the small minority of community administrators who felt political leaders were too involved may have been in the proximity of Chicago. Therefore, the interpretation of that set of observations is ambiguous.

When asked to consider to what extent the political atmosphere, the exercise of patronage, pay-to-play politics, and exposed corruption in Illinois state government (and Chicago) affected their ability to carry out their duties in a professional manner, 57% of participants said it never affected them, and 43% said they were occasionally affected. As discussed previously, because so few participants responded “Always” or “Often”, those responses were subsumed under the category “Occasionally”. This Illinois/Chicago effect provides an oblique measure of evidence in support of the research hypothesis. It is reasonable to assume, given the aggressiveness of Chicago politics, that this effect is in play, and would have some influence on other towns and cities in Illinois, although the reach of this influence is uncertain. The logic is that if the Illinois/Chicago effect were in play, then a much smaller percentage of administrators should have said they were never affected. Because a majority of administrators indicated they were not affected, this suggests they rejected the Chicago influence, providing evidence for a different political subculture. Another possible explanation is that the Chicago influence simply was not strong enough to reach their community. As before, those who indicated that they were occasionally influenced might have been in

close enough proximity to Chicago to feel the influence. Because suburban/urban communities were 3.6 times more likely than rural communities to feel the Illinois/Chicago effect, this explanation is at least plausible. However, because the vast majority of those who said their performance was affected by the Illinois/Chicago effect generally experienced it only occasionally, suggesting the moralistic political subculture could be moderating the effect.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Of the three political subcultures defined by Elazar (1972), Illinois was characterized as an individualistic subculture, with no significant blending with the other two subcultures. Based on this, the expectation is that most of the towns and cities of Illinois would exhibit political behaviors similar to Chicago and state government, which is the null hypothesis of the current study. However, we speculated that the political subculture of the small towns and cities might be different from the politics of Chicago and the State of Illinois. Based on the preponderance of the evidence, we believe there is a reasonable circumstantial case for rejecting the null hypothesis and concluding the political subculture of the small towns and cities is different from the politics of Chicago and the State of Illinois, and is more similar to a moralistic subculture.

This finding is troubling in a couple of ways. If the finding is true, then Elazar's typology may be wrong, or perhaps has changed since his political subculture theory was originally proposed; or, the typology is only accurate for the largest cities, which comprise the majority of the population of the state. However, if Elazar's theory about the migration patterns of the various immigrant cultures was correct, then why, if the

same immigrant cultures settled homogeneously across Illinois, would the subculture of the small towns and cities be different from Chicago? Perhaps living in a small community suppresses individualistic political instincts, or perhaps those with more individualistic inclinations, in a Darwinian adaptation, gravitated to the larger cities where their political skills provided a better payoff. Perhaps larger cities provide more incentive to engage in individualistic behavior because the financial rewards are greater and large populations provide better cover to those inclined to engage in the most egregious political behaviors. In small towns, it is more difficult to hide egregious behaviors, while in the largest cities the politically elite players are a tiny minority, which makes it harder to detect these illegal/unethical political behaviors, especially if the politically astute minority conspires to engage in these clandestine behaviors.

Unexpected and unexplained departures from a theoretical framework provoke a need for reconciling discordant findings. The most obvious recommendation for further research is to reconcile these findings to the theoretical framework. Perhaps the theoretical framework is temporal, having relevance only for a specific timeframe — a theory expiration date, as it were. If this were the case, it would be interesting to learn how and why the theory gradually lost its potency. If the theory is still intact, then another productive line of inquiry might seek to understand how and why the distribution of individualistic political behaviors became less homogenous within the state; or, how a homogeneous political subculture was transformed.

It is also recommended that the current study be replicated in other states to see if the same phenomenon manifests. To eliminate an unnecessary source of variation, it

is recommended that the research focus only on states that were not characterized as “blended” political subcultures.

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**Appendix**  
**Survey Instrument**

## Politics in Small Town Illinois

### Survey Instrument

Q1 What is the population of your community?

- Under 1,500
- 1,501 - 5000
- 5,001 - 10,000
- 10,001 - 25,000
- 25,001 - 50,000
- 50,001 - 75,000
- 75,001 - 100,000
- Over 100,000

Q2 In which state is your community located? (Enter the 2-letter state abbreviation)

IL

Q3 How would you characterize your community?

- Rural - agricultural/business based
- Rural - industrial/business based
- Rural - tourist based
- Suburban
- Urban

Q4 What is the ethnic/racial makeup of your community?

- Majority White
- Majority Non-White

Q5 Which of the following characterizes the minority ethnic/racial distribution in your community?

- More than 30% Hispanic
- More than 30% African-American
- Mixed - no clearly dominant ethnic/racial minority proportion



Q6 What is the form of your community government?

- Council/Manager
- Mayor/Council
- Commission
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Q7 How would you characterize the political nature of your community government?

- Partisan politics
- Non-partisan politics

Q8 What is your age?

- Under 30
- 31 - 45
- 46 - 60
- Over 60

Q9 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

Q10 Of the following, which degree is the highest you have achieved?

- Less than High School
- High School
- Associate Degree
- CPM (Certificate in Public Management)
- Bachelor's Degree (Social Science)
- Bachelor's Degree (Other - Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Master's Degree (MPA)
- Master's Degree (Other - Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Q11 How many years have you been with your present employer?

- Less than 2 years
- 2 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 20 years
- More than 20 years

Q12 How long have you lived in the present community?

- Less than 2 years
- 2 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 20 years
- More than 20 years

Q13 What is the title of your present position?

- Manager/CAO
- Assistant Administrator/Administrative Assistant
- Department Head
- City Clerk/Secretary
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Q14 Were you hired from within the community or from outside the community?

- Hired from within
- Hired from outside

Q15 With regard to your most recent previous employer, in which sector were you employed?

- Public sector
- Private sector
- Non-profit sector

Answer the following question only if you indicated in Question #15 that your previous employer was in the public sector.

Q16 Because you indicated your previous position was with a public sector employer, how many years were you with that employer?

- Less than 2 years
- 2 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 20 years
- More than 20 years

Answer the following question only if you indicated in Question #15 that your previous employer was in the public sector.

Q17 Because you indicated your previous position was with a public sector employer, what was your previous position?

- City Manager/CAO
- Assistant Administrator/Administrative Assistant
- Department Head
- City Clerk/Secretary
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following question only if you indicated in Question #15 that your previous employer was in the public sector.

Q18 Because you indicated your previous position was with a public sector employer, why did you leave your previous employer?

- Too much political pressure
- Better job opportunity
- Fired
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Q19 Do you have authority to \_\_\_\_\_? (Check all that apply)

- Hire
- Fire
- Promote
- Issue contracts

Q20 To the best of your knowledge, are any of your employees related to members of the governing body in any of the following ways? (Check all that apply)

- Related (biologically or legally)
- Good friends (romantically or otherwise)
- Other relationship (e.g. business relationship, professional, client/patient, etc.)
- None of my employees have relationships with elected members of the governing body

Q21 If any of your employees have used their influence with elected members to pressure you to take actions contrary to your professional judgment, to what extent did you succumb to such pressure?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Most of the time
- NA - employees did not exert political influence

Q22 If you have been pressured by elected members to do things or take actions that you considered unethical or unprofessional, to what extent did you succumb to such pressures?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Most of the time
- NA - elected members did not exert political influence

Q23 If you have ever resigned because you felt pressured by political leaders to take an action you considered to be unethical or unprofessional, what was the nature of that unethical/unprofessional action? (Check all that apply)

- Interpersonal conflict
- Financial issues
- Issues of hiring, firing, promoting, or transferring staff
- Pressure to award contracts to politically connected firms
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- I have never resigned because of political pressure

Q24 How would you characterize the political culture of your work environment?

- Professional — I am generally allowed to administer the affairs of the community in a professional manner
- Political — I feel that the political leaders are too involved in administrative affairs
- Balanced — I have a nice balance of freedom and involvement from the political leaders

Q25 As a public administrator, have you or someone you know ever uncovered or exposed illegal activity by an elected member of government?

- No
- Yes (Please specify/elaborate) \_\_\_\_\_

Q26 If you are related to the mayor or any member of the elected governing body, what is the nature of that relationship? (Check all that apply)

- Spouse
- Sibling
- Son/daughter
- Cousin/niece/nephew
- Friend
- In-law
- Other

- Not related to anyone

Q27 In your current position, have you ever succumbed to pressure by the mayor or other elected members to take any of the following actions that were contrary to your professional judgment? If you have not experienced any of these situations, simply select "Other" and specify "none". (Check all that apply)

- Hire an employee
- Fire an employee
- Promote an employee
- Issue a contract with a specific vendor/contractor
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Please provide brief commentary on nature of circumstances

\_\_\_\_\_

Q28 To what extent do you experience significant political interference that makes it difficult for you to do your job in a professional manner?

- Always
- Often
- Occasionally
- Never

Q29 To what extent are elected leaders supportive of you and allow you to do your job in a professional manner?

- Always
- Often
- Occasionally
- Never

Q30 In the past, the courts have made decisions concerning patronage, and may do so in the future. How likely are you to be aware of such decisions?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Very unlikely

Q31 To what extent are you knowledgeable about recent patronage and pay-to-play politics in Chicago and the state of Illinois?

- Very knowledgeable
- Somewhat knowledgeable
- Somewhat unknowledgeable
- Very unknowledgeable

Q32 Illinois has been characterized as a state where people are cynical about government. Unethical politics are accepted as, “that’s the way things are, and that’s ok”, and professional administration is of a lesser concern. With respect to your local municipality and government, to what extent do you perceive that your local situation can be similarly characterized?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q33 To what extent does the political atmosphere, the exercise of patronage, pay-to-play politics, and exposed corruption in Illinois state government and the city of Chicago affect your ability to carry out your duties in a professional manner?

- Always
- Often
- Occasionally
- Never

Q34 With regard to Question #33, please elaborate on your answer.

Q35 Additional Comments: Narrative comments often provide researchers with valuable insight into the issues being investigated. If you would like to elaborate on any specific question(s), we would like to hear what you have to say. In doing so, please refer to the specific question(s) being addressed. In this section, you may also add commentary beyond what was asked in the survey.