The local government landscape is changing. The role played by local governments in
determining who gets what from government has been greatly increased over the last two
decades as responsibilities have been continually devolved to sub-national governments.
Devolution has also increased the fiscal demands and service responsibilities of local
governments. More than any other time in our history, cities are being asked to do more with
less. City and county governments have found that they have increased responsibility for many
issues with regional implications, such as environmental policy, economic development, and
growth management. Public officials, governmental administrators, and academics alike have
once again begun to look toward regional approaches for dealing with these problems. These
include efforts to forge cooperative arrangements among local jurisdictions and efforts to
reorganize local government institutions and structures. Chief among the structural reforms
proposed is city-county consolidation: the merging of a county government with one or more
municipal governments in a metropolitan area to create a single unified governmental unit.

This phenomenon has brought several questions regarding consolidation to the fore:
What explains the resurgence of interest in city-county consolidation? What are the benefits of
consolidation and why do its proponents seek it over other potential reforms? Are there other
avenues to achieve consolidation short of completely consolidating two or more governments?
Finally, what are the political obstacles to getting city-county consolidation on the agenda and
under what conditions do these efforts succeed or fail? Despite a large body of work over several
decades, the answers to these questions are incomplete at best. The chapters in this volume constitute our responses to these questions.

This introduction surveys the contours of a research agenda on city-county consolidation and frames the contributions of the chapters within this framework. City-county consolidation is often presented as a regional solution to the problems confronting America’s urban areas. Savitch and Vogel (2000) contrast “government versus governance” as competing forms of regionalism. City-county consolidation falls squarely in the first category. City-county consolidation builds upon the progressive reform tradition that emphasizes structural reform of local governments. We outline some important issues confronting contemporary efforts to consolidate governments and sketch a theoretical approach, based in part on Elinor Ostrom’s (1990) institutional analysis and development framework, to understand both the motivations for pursuing consolidation and the way that rules guiding the process shape the outcome of these efforts. The individual chapters then begin to fill out the details of this sketch. We examine the push for city-county consolidation by explaining the current context in which such decisions are debated. Several alternatives to city-county consolidation are then explored in turn. An interest in potential cost savings produced by the consolidation of public services previously provided by two or more different local governments has often led communities to consider city-county consolidation. The transaction costs of city-county consolidation are examined and then compared against the costs of municipal annexation, interlocal agreements, and the use of special district governments to achieve the desired consolidation of services. We then compare competing perspectives for and against consolidation and put together some of the pieces of an explanatory theory of local government consolidation. Several of the issues examined in this volume are previewed in detail in the rest of this chapter.
Consolidation and Progressive Reform

The interest of metropolitan reformers has returned to city-county consolidation after waning throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s. Only 25 referenda occurred over the entire decade of the 1980s (Carr & Feiock, 2002). However, in the wake of the successful city-county consolidation of Wyandotte County with Kansas City, Kansas in 1997, more than a dozen communities have either put consolidation referenda to voters or conducted consolidation studies in anticipation of such a referendum (Carr & Feiock, 2002; Feiock & Carr, 2000). Thus far, three communities from this group have elected to consolidate their governments: the consolidated city and county government of Broomfield, Colorado was approved in 1998, Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky were consolidated in 2000, and the town of Hartsville was consolidated with Trousdale County, Tennessee in 2002.

Consolidation efforts can be placed in the context of both the “progressive reform” and “new regionalism” movements. Historical review of municipal reform movements provides context for examining the logic of city-county consolidation and the arguments for consolidation grounded in values of efficiency, accountability, and good government. In the next chapter, Suzanne Leland and Gary Johnson describe the reformists’ theoretical perspective and explain why they seek the consolidation of city and county governments. They argue that the advocates of city-county consolidation share objectives similar to the municipal reformers of the 20th century. These reformers used structural changes to wrest control of city governments from the political machines that had come to dominate municipal politics. Similarly, they contend that the proponents of consolidation see it as an avenue to a new form of government, one that will emphasize efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and accountability to the entire community.
Recent work within the progressive reform tradition elaborates these arguments by asserting that consolidation of local governments modifies the configuration of local governance in a manner that creates low-power incentives that allow for a greater emphasis on citywide issues and constituencies, and enhances the role of professional expertise in informing public decisions. Consolidated government is presumed to allow for greater consideration of regional interests, rather than more narrow territorial interests. This again suggests that consolidation of city and county governments should translate into more efficient and professional local government.

Recently, progressive reform approaches have been supplemented, and at some points displaced, by “neo-progressive” arguments based on the implications of governmental consolidation for democratic governance, economic development, and equality. According to the neo-progressive argument, consolidation invigorates local democracy through increased participation and accountability. Consolidation also provides a mechanism to overcome barriers to cooperation, to redress environmental externalities and urban sprawl, and to reduce inequality and income differentials in metro areas. The neo-progressive case for consolidation draws from literatures on smart growth and sprawl in urban planning, theories of democratic accountability, as well as the study of citizen information and satisfaction with service delivery (Lowery, 2000).

Does Consolidation Deliver on its Promises?

The evidence regarding the efficacy of city-county consolidation is open to alternative interpretations. Those promoting consolidation confront both a cogent and well-developed theory for multiple competing and overlapping jurisdictions and a body of empirical evidence indicating the decentralized government results in greater efficiency than consolidated government. In turn,
those opposing consolidation confront a century of positive experiences with the product of previous reform efforts, such as the widespread acclaim for the council-manager system of local government. Unfortunately, a review of the evidence regarding the political, economic and fiscal consequences of city-county consolidation suggests that clear guidance to political reformers is lacking.

Simply put, the ability of consolidated government to produce the benefits promised by its proponents has not been established. Claims that these benefits are plainly in evidence in existing consolidated governments are a staple of newspaper editorials, but systematic analyses of the political, economic, and fiscal effects of city-county consolidation are conspicuously absent. This is partly due to an over reliance on case analyses of city-county consolidation. In contrast to other local government reforms, city-county consolidation has been studied almost entirely in terms of case studies of single communities. Researchers have regularly analyzed the effects on communities of adopting the council-manager form of government (e.g., Feiock, Jeong, & Kim, 2003; Ruhil, 2003), or from the use of nonpartisan ballots and at-large elections (e.g., Welch & Bledsoe, 1988) with studies examining hundreds, if not thousands, of cases. Yet analyses of city-county consolidation involving even three or four communities are extremely rare. The comparative analyses presented in chapters 9 and 11 in this volume are an important step toward filling this enormous gap in the extant literature.

A second reason for the lack of evidence about these impacts is that analyses of city-county consolidation more often focus on the process of the campaigns to create city-county governments. The objective of these analyses has not been to document the effects of consolidation, but to discover why a particular community successfully adopted city-county government. The emphasis has been on process so that, in part, consolidation proponents in other communities could figure out how they might replicate these winning efforts in their own
communities. Unfortunately, much of this literature seems to advocate, rather than analyze, this topic.

In Chapter 3, Richard Feiock offers another perspective on the question of the impacts of governmental consolidation. He argues that the efficiency claims of the progressives have been largely discredited and support for the neo-progressive argument is not much stronger. He notes that several studies have shown that consolidated governments do not enhance economic development, and in specific cases have led to increased taxes and expenditures, greater dissatisfaction among employees, and reduced turn-out in local elections. Furthermore, he contends that studies reporting positive outcomes stemming from unified government often conclude that these benefits are small, or at least, are partly offset by the costs of consolidated government. Feiock offers an interesting explanation for these findings: He contends that efficiency gains are not realized because the selective benefits that motivate the subset of supporters (i.e., the “consolidation entrepreneurs”) willing to bear the costs of initiating and sustaining these efforts overpower collective “good government” benefits. The result is that the political bargains that are necessary to gain political support for consolidation result in modifications that dissipate its potential collective benefit.

**Alternatives to City-County Consolidation**

Back in 1979, Vincent Marando pressed the academic community to begin to examine alternatives to city-county consolidation. This encouragement was based on a recognition that city-county consolidation was simply too difficult to achieve in most communities and that other, less radical, changes were more politically feasible. In the years since Marando’s call, empirical evidence showing that these other approaches may provide many of the same benefits as
consolidation without the concomitant maladies associated with a single metropolitan government has continued to mount. Among these alternatives are municipal annexation, contracting for services through interlocal agreements with other governments, and the creation of special district governments. None of these alternatives provides all of the benefits promised by the advocates of city-county consolidation, but taken as a group, they achieve many of the same benefits as full governmental consolidation. Equally important, each alternative may very well provide its benefits at a lower cost to the community than city-county consolidation (Carr, 2004).

Transaction Costs and Consolidated Government

Despite the longstanding arguments for city-county consolidation made by the progressive and neo-progressive reformers, the fact remains that communities most often forgo governmental consolidation in favor of these other approaches. In Chapter 4 Allen Brierly raises the question of why new governments are so often created and existing governments not combined, given that economies of scale are so widely expected to result from consolidation. He asserts that choices in favor of new governments result from an awareness of the high transaction costs present in large areawide governments. Using formal models, Brierly shows that the formation of a single metropolitan government maximizes the cost of transacting. The transactions to which he refers are the stream of decisions that occur as a part of the provision and production of public services. Included in the costs of transacting are coordination, contracting, and contacting costs. The cost of transacting is maximized in metropolitan government because organizations with monopoly control maximize the number and scope of transactions within bureaucracy. Thus, any reorganization that consolidates functions to a centrally located administration with a single
mechanism for allocating policy maximizes transaction costs within organizations and between residents and service providers.

Brierly’s work highlights the important link between the scale of organizations and the coordination of services. He shows that even if scale economies are possible, they may be offset by higher coordination costs because a consolidated bureaucracy will typically provide services at a large number of locations. Furthermore, each service is likely to have a different market area, so that each service must be provided by a large number of different locations. “By maximizing the number of locations and differentiation of service areas, metropolitan government maximizes intra-organizational transaction costs. Whether we choose to call these contracting costs, bureaucratic inefficiencies, or too much taxes for too few services, metropolitan government requires a much greater scope of coordination than traditional forms of local government” (Brierly, NEED PAGE #: FROM CHAPTER 4, LAST PART OF SEVENTH PARAGRAPH IN LIT REVIEW SECTION). Thus, communities confront the following dilemma with city-county consolidation: combining the governments may reduce the cost per capita of producing public services, but increase overall transaction costs.

Brierly also shows that city-county consolidation may lead to higher transaction costs in the interactions between residents and the service bureaucracies. He notes that the number of service locations and the distance to these locations are key elements in determining the responsiveness of a government. The need to centralize administration in large scale organizations reduces access and encourages uniform service provision. Consolidation thereby increases the costs to citizens of contacting the various service departments of this larger government, and the move to uniform service provision makes it more difficult for the government to respond to differing preferences for services across a larger and, typically, more diverse community. As it turns out, consolidation advocates are not only aware of this cost, but
they actually seek it: As Leland and Johnson comment in the next chapter, “As with the municipal reform movement, consolidation advocates wish to trade responsiveness for professional managerial accountability that they believe will lead to more efficient government” (Leland & Johnson, Chapter 2: NEED PAGE #, QUOTE IS TAKEN FROM FIRST PARAGAPH IN SECTION ENTITLED, PRO-CONSOLIDATION FORCES ROOTED IN THE REFORM MOVEMENT). Not only do these reforms reduce the “meddling” of politicians in administration, but they tend to work against citizen involvement as well. To some this is a good thing, but as Brierly’s work shows, contact costs can be high. And as Brierly correctly points out, a preference for small jurisdictions and decentralized governance is not simply a preference for minimal government but for government that is more coordinated, understandable, and easier to manage.

**Consolidation through Annexation, Special District Governments, and Interlocal Agreements**

The alternatives to city-county consolidation presented in this volume create opportunities to capture some of the benefits of scale economies, when present, while avoiding some of the coordinating and contacting costs seen in metropolitan government. Brierly explains how municipal annexation can be used in place of governmental consolidation in Chapter 5. Municipal annexation is an alternative to city-county consolidation that may enable the community to achieve a better tradeoff between scale economies and coordination costs. It permits the municipality to expand its customer base to a level that can effectively capture scale economies. Municipal annexation can also prevent the fragmentation of metropolitan areas into numerous small jurisdictions, each producing services at a level too small to be cost effective.
Complicating the use of municipal annexation is that it is a means both for seeking scale economies and for gaining control over suburban land area (Carr & Feiock, 2003). Municipal expansion through the annexation of fringe areas has long been an avenue for cities to protect their tax base and pursue economic development. As a method for controlling land use, annexation can be used to permit activities that would not have gone forward under the previous jurisdiction or to stop activities that would have happened. As a consequence, annexation is often viewed as a tool that benefits cities at the expense of other local governments (Carr & Feiock, 2003). Indeed, city-county consolidation is often presented, in part, as a way to stop large scale annexations by the primary city in the county.

Brierly observes that governmental consolidation is simply a large scale annexation. Indeed, the implications of these two alternatives for the transaction costs of providing and producing public services are very similar. Both approaches lead to a large scale organization with monopoly (city-county consolidation) or near monopoly (municipal annexation) control over decisions of provision and production of public services. Of course, annexation almost always occurs on a smaller scale than city-county consolidation, which creates opportunities for lower coordination and contacting costs. They also share the ability to create a more visible, higher status jurisdiction, an outcome often prized by the community’s “boosters.” For some, simply being bigger is better; a greater population translates into greater importance on the national stage. However, when viewed in terms of the politics surrounding their use, annexation and city-county consolidation are very different activities. As Linda Johnson points out in Chapter 8, crafting a city-county charter is a constitutional change. It involves more than the extension of an existing government to a new set of people; it is the opportunity to create a new government for all (or virtually all) of the county’s population. No matter how extensive an annexation may be, two facts remain: First, for most of the people in the community, their
government does not change. They either already live within the existing municipal government or they are not part of the proposed annexation. Second, for those people in the area proposed for annexation, the choice is between the existing structure and the municipal government. With city-county consolidation, an entire new government will be created through the process. This raises the stakes enormously and sets the stage for an intense political struggle over the rules governing the process for writing the charter, the structure of the new government and the powers it will possess, and whether it is adopted. The politics of city-county consolidation will be discussed at length in the next section.

The other two alternatives discussed in this volume, interlocal agreements (ILAs) and special district governments (SDGs), are similar both in terms of their effects on the scale-transaction cost question and in the politics of their use. Largely due the efforts of public choice scholars, it is now widely recognized that efficiency gains from scale vary substantially across different types of services because these gains are dependent upon the cost and output characteristics of the goods and services being produced. Selective consolidation of those functions with scale economies in excess of coordination costs may be a more effective way to achieve cost savings than city-county consolidation. Selective consolidation can be achieved through interlocal agreements or special district governments. In Chapter 6, Kurt Thurmaier and Curtis Wood demonstrate that ILAs can be an effective alternative to complete city-county consolidation. Interlocal agreements can selectively target particular good and services that exhibit externalities or scale economies. Likewise, in Chapter 7 Barbara McCabe proposes that the formation of special districts can also provide a mechanism for achieving the scale efficiencies sought through governmental consolidation. She notes that the formation of SDGs has been widely used by cities to facilitate regional planning, access new revenue sources, circumvent local debt restrictions, and to ensure that the cost of service provision is distributed
among all residents receiving the service. Importantly, both approaches are capable of solving transjurisdictional problems. Thurmaier and Wood note that these are the very kind of problems most likely to create a climate that leads to calls for city-county consolidation. Both approaches provide the flexibility to capture scale economies where they exist, while retaining the benefits of smaller, more homogenous jurisdictions for services without scale economies.

In contrast to the status-enhancing benefits of city-county consolidation and municipal annexation, the use of SDGs and ILAs are options with low public visibility. The general public is typically unaware that these arrangements are in place and rarely are the use of these alternatives subject to significant public debate. When these approaches are debated, both are seen as means to achieve intergovernmental cooperation, an activity strongly encouraged by state legislatures and editorial writers. An important distinction between ILAs and SDGs is that special districts create arrangements with substantially more permanence. The creation of a special district government is the creation of a new political jurisdiction. This new jurisdiction may be empowered to levy taxes, borrow money, and be politically independent from all of the preexisting local governments. In contrast, ILAs are contractual agreements that the parties can modify or choose not to renew. McCabe notes that this means that the decisions reflected by the choice to create a special district can survive the current administration, whereas ILAs can be easily changed. Kathryn Foster (1997) has argued that political leaders use SDGs to protect spending on certain services. Provision through special districts grant services with a dedicated revenue stream and removes them from the normal appropriations process, allowing the beneficiaries of this spending to avoid direct competition with the spending priorities pressed by others in the community. ILAs may commit the jurisdiction to contractually-mandated spending levels, but the commitments can be changed over time and the expenditures on contracted
services are openly debated when the jurisdiction’s budget is adopted and must be justified in light of the jurisdiction’s other needs.

In contrast to municipal annexation and city-county consolidation, ILAs and SDGs do not displace preexisting arrangements. Instead, both approaches overlap existing arrangements and, consequently, add to the complexity of local governance. Once again, desires for responsiveness must be balanced against the benefits of scale economies. Like city-county consolidation, both of these approaches may make transacting more costly. Special district governments may substantially increase contacting costs, as residents will often not understand which jurisdiction has responsibility for providing the service. Again, the public will typically not recognize that the service is provided by a jurisdiction politically independent from the city and county governments. ILAs impose a lower contacting cost, as the contracting jurisdictions still maintain responsibility for providing the service, but ILAs may impose significant contracting costs. This latter form of costs can be substantial, as Brierly shows in Chapter 4.

The analyses presented by Brierly, Thurmaier and Wood, and McCabe demonstrate that the cost consequences of consolidating governments is far more complex than is suggested by the arguments of the progressive and neo-progressive reformers. City-county consolidation does not always result in lower costs for the delivery of public services, and in many instances, will make these efforts more costly. Brierly shows that consolidation will often be a cost-effective approach to service delivery, but that most often city-county consolidation will not be the most efficient way to pursue this consolidation. Municipal annexation, special district government, and interlocal agreements will be less costly approaches to the consolidation of public services delivery. Brierly concludes that despite its appeal to many in the community, city-county consolidation is often the least feasible of the four approaches to consolidation discussed in this volume. He argues that an analysis of the transaction costs of local governance shows that the
most efficient organizational form is likely a federated metropolitan government. He contends that this form is most able to strike the necessary balance between scale economies and coordinating, contacting, and contracting costs. Municipal annexation, special district government, and interlocal agreements can each be used within a federated metropolitan government; only city-county consolidation is precluded by this form of local governance.

The Politics of City-County Consolidation

Perhaps the single most intriguing question about city-county consolidation is why it continues to appear on local agendas. If the performance of the existing city-county governments were demonstrably strong, the resurgence of interest in this topic would not be an unexpected phenomenon. However, given the general lack of evidence of the collective benefits promised for consolidation beyond the anecdotal accounts offered by its proponents, its resilience is remarkable. It is even more remarkable when one considers the level of bitterness and rancor typically present in these efforts. A campaign to consolidate the two most important governments in the area can place great stress on a community. Resentment over a consolidation campaign may linger in the community years after the referendum is held.

Why do the advocates of city-county consolidation risk this level of turmoil in the community? Perhaps proponents do not understand the regularity with which consolidation is rejected in community after community. Another explanation is that the advocates do not anticipate the acrimony so often present in debates over city-county consolidation. Maybe instead it is the attraction of the perceived benefits that leads them to initiate such a divisive, difficult effort. The advocates of consolidation may believe the community’s situation is dire and that resistance to the change is based in the opponents’ self-interest in maintaining the status quo.
This kind of view is consistent with the process depicted in Walter Rosenbaum and Gladys Kammerer’s (1974) classic study of the consolidation process in two Florida counties during the late 1960s. The model they developed from the experiences of these two communities has been the dominant explanation of the city-county consolidation process for nearly three decades.

**Conventional Models of City-County Consolidation**

The Rosenbaum and Kammerer model seeks to explain the outcome of the referendum on city-county government based on the presence or absence of problems in the community in the weeks, months, and, even years, preceding the referendum. These problems are said to trigger citizen demands that the government take appropriate action to alleviate these problems. Fundamentally, this lack of adequate response to ongoing problems is thought to prompt proponents to put consolidation on the agenda. An appropriate response will defuse the drive for consolidation, whereas inattention or blundered efforts will propel the consolidation effort forward. They suggest that additional evidence of incompetence or inattention to these problems sufficient to erode public confidence in the existing government is usually required to strength the case of the proponents and to further ripen the issue. Finally, some catastrophic event, scandal, or series of events is then necessary to create the critical situation that provides the support necessary for consolidation to be approved by the general public. Of course, their model is substantially more complex than this description suggests, but this brief sketch captures the fundamental logic underlying the model. Linda Johnson provides a much more detailed account of the multiple stages of the Rosenbaum and Kammerer model in Chapter 8.

This depiction of the consolidation process strikes us as a heroic description of local government reorganization. In times of crisis, a segment of the community rises up to adopt a
new form of government, one that is capable of dealing with the problems faced by the entire community and less responsive to the subset of the community who were benefiting under the previous structure. In response to this climate of crisis in the community, civic elites propose and build support for the creation of a new city-county government. This is the image that extant research on city-county consolidation has cultivated over time. However, another perspective on why proponents of consolidation risk wreaking havoc in the community is that they are motivated by the pursuit of benefits that accrue to themselves and their allies.

**Nonheroic Models of City-County Consolidation**

Several of the chapters in this volume directly confront this heroic version of city-county consolidation. The heroic view argues that changes result from publicly-minded people “reforming” the local government. The term reform connotes the removal of defects and that the end result is necessarily an improvement. Reform also often implies that the change will end irresponsible, immoral, or corrupt practices. (You don’t reorganize a drunk, you reform him.) However, the notion that one person’s reform is another person’s mechanism of disenfranchisement is a well-known proposition. As Gary Miller (1985, p. 166) has observed:

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In the early 19th century, Jacksonian democratic reformers took control of cities away from the commercial elites by means of institutional reforms in which large numbers of positions were voted on, the vote was as widespread as possible, and elected officials were responsible for most major decisions. This corresponds with a high score on Maser’s CRD [civil rights] dimension. The Jacksonian municipal charters spread political rights as widely as possible and made them as determinative of policy as possible. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Progressives reacted
against this by a series of state and municipal institutional reforms which resulted in wholesale
disfranchisement of blacks in the South, partial disfranchisement of immigrants in the North,
reduction in the number of elected officials, and increased policy influence of nonelected
officials, selected for their “neutral competence.” The institutional reforms which Maser
incorporates into his CRD dimension capture this Progressive reform as a drastic shift away from
equality of civil rights.

This passage by Gary Miller describes the changes sought by the Progressives as a
reaction against previous reorganizations that emphasized a different, although arguably equally
important, set of values. Existing arrangements create biases toward particular outcomes, and
perhaps, in favor of particular interests within the community. Altering the arrangements may
create a different set of biases and advantage those interests who seek a different set of policies
and who have a different set of resources, values, and objectives. Through these changes, the
welfare of the collective public may be improved, but in many instances the benefits may be felt
unevenly across the community, mostly accruing to subsets of the community. Additionally,
given sufficient stakes, both sides will do whatever it takes to win. Benefits may be exaggerated,
costs understated, and some claims may be completely fabricated. In some cases, winning may
require that the other side be discredited or disabled in some other way. Amy Bridges and
Richard Kronick (1999, pp. 703-704) have argued that the Progressives were successful in
convincing communities to adopt “reformed governments” by manipulating the decision-making
process. “Reform succeeded in the Progressive era less from the support of most voters, than
from the weakness of their opponents in the West, border states, and South. Crucial to
opponents’ weakness was suffrage restriction, which changed the composition of local
electorates, not incidentally disenfranchising the strongest opponents of municipal reform.”
Given the extent of the reorganization brought about by city-county consolidation, the stakes for those gaining and losing from the change are likely substantial.

Thus, a nonheroic view begins with recognition that city-county consolidation is a reorganization of local government (and governance) and not necessarily “reform.” As the passage by Gary Miller highlights, changes to structural arrangements often reflect different preferences for key values: more efficiency at the expense of equity, more professional management at the expense of democratic government, stability in policy decisions at the expense of widespread political participation, and so on. City-county consolidation, like the Progressive movement before it, is part of an ongoing struggle in communities, whereby different interests seek to institutionalize their preferences into the structure of local government.

The final four chapters examine the politics of city-county consolidation in the terms described above. As a group these chapters owe much to the collective insights of Steven Maser, Gary Miller, Terry Moe, Mancur Olson, Elinor Ostrom, Mark Schneider, and Paul Teske. City-county consolidation is part of the politics of institutional choice. It is less a battle of good versus evil than it is an ongoing struggle about the values that will be expressed in the community’s governing arrangements. Leland and Johnson argue that the proponents of city-county consolidation have the mantle of the Progressive Reformers. Essentially, they argue that the objectives of these two groups are similar, and that in many ways consolidation proponents are completing the work begun by the Progressives. Underlying their argument is the premise that if you agree with the values sought by the Progressives, you will also agree with the values of those who seek city-county consolidation. These chapters do not address this question directly, but each offers insight into the broader questions of how city-county charters can be a means to provide distributive and coercive benefits to those who write them, who become involved in
these efforts, what they seek, and how they portray the effects of city-county consolidation to the larger community.

*The Politics of Institutional Choice*

Drawing on the work of Steven Maser and Elinor Ostrom, Linda Johnson reframes the Rosenbaum and Kammerer model to provide a more realistic description of how these efforts unfold. Central to her “revolutionary change model” is recognition of the way the rules of the game shape the behavior of the participants and the extent to which these participants seek to win the game by writing the rules to their advantage. Actors who have an interest in locking in their preferences will seek to do so through the competition over the rules governing the process of city-county consolidation, and in the specific provisions written into the charter. In part, Johnson’s work is an effort to confront the numerous limitations in the Rosenbaum and Kammerer model that have been exposed over the years. However, this chapter does much more than correct the deficiencies of this earlier model; it describes the dynamics of constitutional change. She contends that extant literature has focused too narrowly on the collective costs and benefits of city-county consolidation. What Johnson does better than any other scholar working on this topic is to show that city-county consolidation is about much more than tinkering with the structure of the local government in order to fix problems. She shows that city-county consolidation is fundamentally about seizing power from those interests most advantaged by the status quo. An effort to create a city-county government to replace the existing governments is a revolutionary change. Not just in terms of size, but in terms of content. It involves the process of dissolving two constitutions—city and county—and replacing them with a single constitution. Johnson shows how rules, participants, and incentives interact with one another in the process of
constitutional change. Importantly, she shows that selective benefits accrue to the winners of the revolution. Because institutions matter, the preferences of the winners are locked into the new government. While advocates seeking city-county government may cloak their arguments in terms of the collective benefits of “good government,” “more efficient government,” or “community progress,” the charter is a means for these same advocates to pursue more narrow, or selective, benefits.

Demanders of Change and the Defenders of the Status Quo

Richard Feiock asserts in Chapter 3 that the proponents of consolidation are likely more strongly motivated by the pursuit of these selective benefits than by the collective benefits attributed to city-county consolidation. He does not reject the notion that proponents may seek city-county consolidation because they believe it to be in the interest of the entire community. Instead, his contention is that given the high cost of action, selective incentives are much more powerful motivators than are the diffuse, nonexcludable collective benefits attributed to city-county consolidation. Likewise, Linda Johnson argues that access to the local constitution provides many of the key figures in city-county consolidation with an avenue to institutionalize distributive benefits for themselves and their allies. Business interests, civic organizations, local officials, academic elites, and the local media each have potential to secure private benefits from city-county consolidation. While the motives of these actors are often attributed to concerns for “good government” or “community progress,” they will often have private benefits at stake.

Which actors become involved in city-county consolidation and what do they seek? The survey findings presented by Jered Carr, Richard Feiock, and Bethany Sneed in Chapter 9 provide answers to these questions. This examination (and the later one in Chapter 11) is based
on the findings of a survey of 33 communities holding referenda on city-county consolidation between 1987 and 1999. The chapter presents an extensive examination of the arguments made in these efforts, the actors who become involved, and importantly, how their involvement changed over the stages of this issue. Whereas previous work analyzing elite attitudes toward city-county consolidation focused on how elites view this literature (see Chapter 11 for a review of these studies), the data from this survey examine what elites said publicly about this issue. This is an important distinction. Examining what elites say about city-county consolidation permits study of how elite attitudes shape public opinion, and consequently, whether these proposals are approved or rejected in communities. This is the kind of analysis begun in Chapter 9 and extended in Chapter 11. However, given the strategic nature of these efforts, these public claims may not reveal hidden agendas that are also being pursued; an activity that Linda Johnson shows is an important feature of revolutionary change. Public claims are made for public consumption and are a means to sway others to a particular viewpoint. There is no requirement that the content of these claims be accurate, nor reflective of the claimant’s true views about city-county consolidation.

Carr and his colleagues show that arguments couched in collective and selective terms are raised in debates over city-county consolidation by both proponents and opponents. As anticipated, the survey data show that arguments promising collective benefits were the most common across the communities. Arguments about selective benefits and costs were also common, but many of arguments about collective benefits appeared in almost every community. Arguments couched in collective terms are less likely to provide motivation to opponents of the reorganization, but these arguments are also likely to be less effective for motivating others in the community to work for the change. To the extent that city-county consolidation is presented as a means to achieve collective benefits for the community, free-ridership problems will be a
huge obstacle for proponents. One solution to this problem is the emergence of an entrepreneur able to secure private benefits from reorganization and willing to provide the financial and organizational resources necessary to sustain the collective action. Schneider, Teske, and Mintrom (1995) argued that public entrepreneurs emerge when the benefits of action are high or the costs are low. The survey findings presented by Carr and his colleagues suggest the Chamber of Commerce, the local newspaper, and the city mayor are likely candidates for the role of consolidation entrepreneur. On the other side, county and city employees, county and city commissioners, constitutional officers, and taxpayer groups are likely candidates to emerge as anti-consolidation entrepreneurs.

In most instances, city-county consolidation is a three-stage process. Proponents must first get the proposal on the agendas of two (or more) local governments, a city-county charter must then be written, and then a public referendum on the proposed charter is held. As these are fundamentally different kinds of activities, these different stages may require different combinations of resources to be successful. The lowest hurdle for potential entrepreneurs is getting the issue on the agendas on the local governments. However, gaining access to the local agenda and winning a countywide referendum are very different activities in terms of the level of difficulty in organizing and sustaining the action, and in the costs and benefits of pursuing the opportunity. The survey data reported in Chapter 9 confirm this proposition: Whereas city-county consolidation made it on the agenda in all 33 communities, the proposal was approved in only five. Thus, getting on the agenda was a relatively easier task than gaining approval of the city-county government. Another interesting finding is revealed through this survey: Proponents appeared to collectively give up on the issue; many of the individual officials and community organizations identified as proponents were not as involved in the referendum as they were in the effort to get city-county consolidation on the agenda in the community. This may reflect many
things: For example, it may suggest collective action difficulties made participation in the referendum more difficult than pressing the city and county councils or the legislature to put consolidation on the agenda; recognition by many of the proponents that rejection of the charter is imminent and continued involvement is wasted effort; or dissatisfaction by this now less enthusiastic group of proponents with the provisions in the charter that has been produced or with some other element of the process. The survey data do not reveal why these proponents were less active in the referendum on the city-county charter, but simply that their involvement declined. In contrast, the data show that two key anti-consolidation entrepreneurs, public employees and local government officials, increased their activity in the referendum stage.

The process described thus far depicts city-county consolidation in terms of a struggle between community actors, but state officials also play key roles in some consolidation efforts. These efforts still follow this three-stage process, but the participation of the community in the process can be greatly diminished, and this difference may have important consequences for how the community views the new government. In Chapter 10, Raymond Rosenfeld and Laura Reese examine the experience in Ottawa, Canada with governmental consolidations that were mandated by the provincial government. In the case of the Ottawa consolidations--or amalgamations--as they are called in Canada, the arrangements were imposed from the top-down by the provincial government, with minimal input from the affected communities. In this case, the battle is over and the demanders of the status quo have lost. The struggle may have been lost because local consolidation proponents expanded the scope of conflict and brought the provincial government into the issue, or provincial officials may have intervened without encouragement from any community interests. Rosenfeld and Reese question if the lack of a lengthy campaign to adopt the new government, complete with a public referendum in which the people of the community voted to consolidate the existing governments, means the conditions necessary for the new
government to achieve its stated objectives are not created. They note: “While the mechanical process of forming a new governmental structure may go more quickly without the political bargaining and voter approval required in bottom-up consolidations, the actual transition to a unified governing system may take longer precisely because there is no political buy-in on a broad scale.” (NEED PAGE NUMBER FOR THIS QUOTE. IT IS FROM CHAPTER 10. IT IS THE FINAL SENTENCE PRECEDING THE SECTION ENTITLED “PROPOSITIONS ABOUT TOP-DOWN CONSOLIDATIONS.”) In Chapter 3, Richard Feiock argues that city-county consolidation may not achieve the objectives set out for it because of too much political bargaining. Rosenfeld and Reese suggest the same outcome may result from too little political bargaining.

Richard Feiock proposed in Chapter 3 that proponents trade collective benefits for approval of city-county government. This is a provocative assertion and one not directly answered by any of the chapters in this volume. However, the survey data presented in Chapter 9 do provide some insight into this question. First, in most cases, the data show that many of the provisions associated with the notion of city-county consolidation as a centralizing and streamlining reorganization of local governments in the area are simply not present in these charters. In many instances, existing jurisdictions are preserved, formations of new jurisdictions in the future are not prohibited, and key political offices are maintained. Perhaps this is evidence of the bargaining suggested by Feiock; the charters put before voters lacked many of the provisions that would remove institutions already providing distributive benefits and not prohibit the creation of these arrangements in the future. In addition, the survey covered only a few charter provisions, but the analysis does show that those charters not dissolving special districts were more often approved by the community. A second insight provided by these data is that the absence of these provisions is not enough to ensure approval of the charter. This may indicate
that this type of political bargaining is, at best, a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the approval of city-county government charters.

*A War of Words: Claims and Counter-Claims about City-County Consolidation*

In Chapter 11, Linda Johnson and Jered Carr examine the claims made in campaigns to consolidate city and county governments. The question of whether the two most important local governments in the area should be consolidated may very well be the most complex and comprehensive policy change that the people of the community will ever be asked to consider. When city-county consolidation is first proposed in the community, it is normally a concept unknown, or at least unfamiliar, to the general public. They contend that in contrast to “bricks and mortar” proposals, such as civic centers and sports arenas, or even financial proposals for millage increases and bond issues, the general public often does not have a predetermined notion of what city-county consolidation will mean for the community. This lack of definition gives both opponents and proponents the opportunity to define the issue for the public. Participants may seek to define city-county consolidation as a means for improving economic development, streamlining local government, marginalizing African-American political power, enabling the city government to grab suburban wealth, and so on. Johnson and Carr contend that participants are only limited by their creativity when it comes to defining this issue.

We know from the survey findings reported in Chapter 9 that proponents often make the familiar arguments about economic development and more efficient government and efficiency, and opponents counter with claims about increased taxes and more bureaucratic government, among others. What we do not know, however, is whether the use of these arguments is a winning strategy. Are there particular arguments that are effective for winning approval of city-
county governments? Which opposing arguments are the most effective at preventing the approval of city-county government? And perhaps most important of all, are there any combinations of arguments that seem to be effective? Johnson and Carr explore an aspect of city-county consolidation that has gone virtually unexamined in extant literature. An effort to create a city-county government is a war of words. While some of these claims may be made to exploit perceived problems in the community, others are likely to be in response to specific claims made by the other side. Questions about the particular arguments made have been asked and answered in case studies of individual communities, but not in comparative analyses of several dozen communities. The data collected through the survey of communities holding referenda on consolidation provide a unique opportunity to examine these claims from a comparative perspective. The benefit to an analysis of this sort is not in identifying a list of effective arguments, but in examining how the arguments are used together, both in terms of proponent-opponent claims, and in the combinations of arguments chosen by each side.

This chapter extends the assault on the heroic version of city-county consolidation campaigns. Johnson and Carr describe a process whereby participants choose arguments intended to exploit latent attitudes in the community. These arguments may have little to do with the actual effects of the proposed reorganization. Proponents seek to associate city-county consolidation with preferences for increased economic development, less costly and more effective government, and so on. In an earlier time, proponents might have sought to exploit racial tensions in the community by suggesting consolidation would be an effective mechanism to staunch growing African-American political power or to prevent this group from ever gaining significant power. Now, proponents are more likely to suggest that economic development will be enhanced or that consolidation is a means to get rid of one or more unsavory local politicians, particularly in their public pronouncements. In contrast, opponents seek to link city-county
consolidation to all things viewed negatively in the community. City-county consolidation will lead to higher taxes, bigger and more bureaucratic government, and the loss of a favorite local politician or two, and so on.

This process may also determine who will become involved in the issue. Johnson and Carr contend arguments made by key community leaders may have intended and unintended effects. Their participation provides cues to those in the community with common interests and similar viewpoints on other issues, but also to those in the community who often find themselves in opposition to the priorities supported by the stakeholder. For example, the advocacy of the media, Chamber of Commerce, and the out-of-power groups, may be embraced by some elements in the community and viewed suspiciously by others. Opposing claims often frame city-county consolidation as a zero-sum game, which at the very least alerts the groups accused of benefiting at the claimant’s expense that their own interests may be in danger. Despite the risk of drawing others into the debate, opposition to consolidation is often framed this way. Even though supporters may anticipate narrow benefits to accrue to themselves from city-county consolidation, they seem less likely to offer these kinds of arguments publicly.

The depiction of the process offered by Johnson and Carr suggests that the latent attitudes available to be exploited for the support or opposition to city-county consolidation likely vary across communities. The analyses in Chapter 11 confirm this proposition by showing that the combinations of claims vary enormously from one community to the next, and that no single set of claims emerges as key to rejection or approval of the charter. Despite the variety in the sets of claims made across these communities, the analysis does confirm the presence of one widely perceived cleavage in the community. The examination of individual claims shows that many resonated differently with the city and county electorates. Some claims were shown to be
associated with majority support by the city electorate, while having no statistical relationship to
the county vote. Others were shown to be linked to the vote in the county, but not in the city.

The empirical analyses presented in Chapter 11 are fairly rudimentary, but novel. The
data collected through the 33 community survey permits a comparative analysis of how this
process of claims and counterclaims unfolded in these communities. The conjunctural logic of
Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) makes this method perfect for an analysis of this
process. This approach permits an examination of the combination of claims made in these
communities, and importantly, allows an analysis of whether any of the claims appeared to
enable or disable the causal connections between the other claims and the outcome of the
referendum. In other words, are there any claims that appear to enhance the force of other
arguments, and are there any claims that appear to effectively undermine the effectiveness of still
other arguments? These are very difficult questions to examine and these authors make an
important first step toward this end.

Concluding Observations

The local government landscaping is changing. The local government landscape is in a constant
state of change, being shaped and reshaped as the members of communities seek to solve
problems and, through this process, to lock their preferences into the structure of local
government. Through this extended introduction, we have sought to highlight several unresolved
questions about city-county consolidation, and to provide a roadmap for the readers of this
volume. In doing so, we have attempted to draw attention to connections between the chapters
that may not be self-evident at first.
City-county consolidation, like all revolutionary change, is a complex topic. This volume represents a significant departure from previous studies of city-county consolidation in terms of the approach to the topic, the methods used, and the questions addressed. We think this volume is timely not only because of the renewed interest in city-county consolidation seen in communities across the United States (and Canada), but because of the widespread use of municipal annexation, special districts, and interlocal agreements to alter service boundaries in many of these same communities. It is time for students of local government to recognize city-county consolidation as a single approach to the consolidation of public services, and to examine the many alternatives to comprehensive consolidation of governments. The chapters in this volume represent a first effort at this type of analysis. Much of the work in this volume is exploratory, and hopefully, these studies raise many more questions than they answer.
References


