Communications and Feedback
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Structuring the Debate on Consolidation: A Response to Leland and Thurmaier

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In their essay "When Efficiency Is Unbelievable: Normative Lessons from 30 Years of City–County Consolidations," published in the July/August 2005 issue of PAR, Leland and Thurmaier make an important contribution to understanding how city–county consolidation occurs. They revise the widely accepted Rosenbaum and Kammerer model of consolidation and posit that "strong arguments" based on economic development, especially in the absence of organized opposition, led to victory for consolidation advocates. In this response, we argue that efforts to identify a set of arguments or charter provisions that will lead to successful consolidation are misguided. The real story in consolidation campaigns is how participants use heresthetical arguments in an effort to turn their opponents into political losers. What makes arguments strong or weak is not their substantive policy focus, but how they are structured.

In their essay "When Efficiency Is Unbelievable" and the book on which it is based, Suzanne Leland and Kurt Thurmaier make an important contribution to understanding how consolidation occurs by challenging and revising the widely accepted Rosenbaum and Kammerer (1974) model of city–county consolidation. They divide the process into agenda setting and the campaign for or against the charter; place greater emphasis on each state's legal framework, alternative responses, and the impact of specific charter provisions; and add to their model the referendum campaign stage suggested by Messinger (1989) and Johnson and Feiock (1999). These are important insights because extant research has focused on identifying responses to crises and accelerating events, to the neglect of participants' efforts to exploit latent attitudes in the community and define city–county consolidation in ways that bring a majority to their side.

The cases reviewed by Leland and Thurmaier illustrate an important point about the politics of consolidations: Efforts to reorganize local governments are not fought in terms of the likely costs and benefits of these changes but in terms of the arguments the combatants choose to make. For the cases reviewed in their book, Leland and Thurmaier contend that "strong arguments" based on economic development, especially in the absence of organized opposition, led to victory for consolidation advocates, and "weak arguments" (not based on economic development) led to defeat. Three decades earlier, consolidation arguments based on governmental incapacity and racial polarization worked in the same manner (Rosenbaum and Henderson 1973; Rosenbaum and Kammerer 1974). Although these are probably accurate descriptions of at least a majority of the cases during these two eras, the case analyses employed by both sets of scholars lead them on a search for a recipe for successful consolidation. In so doing, they miss the evidence that it is the structure, not the substance, of the arguments that counts. What makes arguments strong or weak is not their substantive policy focus, but how they are structured. Consolidation campaigns are intensely contested and often highly rancorous debates about how local government in the region should be organized. Both sides in this debate share the objective of framing the issue in terms capable of achieving majority support for their side. We think that efforts to identify a decisive set of arguments or charter provisions are misguided. The real story in consolidation campaigns is how participants use heresthetical arguments in an effort to turn their opponents into political losers.

Heresthetics: The Art of Political Manipulation

The term "heresthetics" was coined by William H. Riker (1984, 1986, 1990) to refer to a political

strategy that involves winning because the situation has been defined in ways that make people want to join in (on the side of those defining the situation). Heresthetics differs from rhetoric in important ways. Rhetoric is intended to persuade, whereas the objective of heresthetics is to structure the decision-making situation to one interest's advantage: "[T]he distinguishing feature of a heresthetic [argument] is that voters are induced to change sides, not by persuasion, but by reinterpretation of the issue" (Riker 1990, 49). Rhetorical arguments use language to persuade people of the rightness or wrongness of a position, whereas heresthetical devices seek to change people's choices through a strategic reframing of an issue. In other words, rhetoric involves relocating people's ideal points on a parameter, whereas "[h]eresthetics may involve displaying the relevance of a dimension, recalling it from latent storage to the center of psychic attention" (Riker 1990, 54). These maneuvers do not seek to change attitudes, but instead to exploit existing ones for use in this decision.

At least three broad categories of heresthetical strategies are seen in consolidation campaigns and can be used by either side to define the debate surrounding the emergence of city–county consolidation as an issue in the community, the design of the proposed charter for the new government, and the referendum on the charter. Throughout these different arenas, the logic of heresthetical maneuvers remains the same: Political losers seek to create opportunities to disrupt the power base of political winners by inventing new dimensions of political conflict and controversy (through reframing old dimensions) or by altering the institutions that sustain their power. Those who are winners seek to deny losers these opportunities. For them, maintaining power is mostly about playing heresthetical defense, fending off calls for changes that might weaken their position (Shepsle 2003).

Introducing New Dimensions
Introducing dimensions is a strategy that can be employed by either side. These dimensions are the public declarations by different interests within the community about the likely effects of the proposed city–county consolidation. Participants strategically introduce dimensions to the debate to define what the proposed consolidation would achieve and how the benefits and costs of the action would be distributed throughout the community. Is consolidation about improving economic development? Reducing taxes? Greater racial exclusion? Enhanced redistribution? Both sides have the shared objective of connecting the proposal to broad themes such as these in an effort to disrupt an existing equilibrium that works against them. A proposal that is seen as improving economic development will likely attract a different coalition than one seen as largely affecting redistribution in the community. Likewise, a proposal that ostensibly

reduces minority power in the central city may attract a different combination of supporters than one designed to reduce the cost of local government in the region. In discussing the use of heresthetics in exclusionary zoning, Clingermayer (2004) observes that participants may seek to mask their actual intentions in terms of language or goals that are considered more socially or politically acceptable. Regardless of whether proponents and opponents reveal their true preferences, their effectiveness in using heresthetical arguments to frame the issue in terms conducive to their side is critical to the outcome.

The case studies of city–county consolidation compiled by Leland and Thurmaier suggest that the use of dimensions is a particularly effective strategy because most participants understand the issue in terms of broad themes. For example, Rosenbaum and Henderson (1973) note that consolidation supporters in Jacksonville tended to coalesce around a small set of fairly vague notions about the economy and efficiency that would be gained through city–county consolidation. However, they found that these same supporters seemed to have little understanding of how this consolidated government would actually produce the benefits they attributed to it.

There are also many examples of strategic redefinition to form alliances in support of or opposition to consolidation. For example, alliance formation around a proposed consolidation charter rule occurred in all four attempts to consolidate Tallahassee and Leon County, Florida (Johnson 2004b). In 1971, opponents used concern over representation in at-large districts to bring together an unlikely coalition. The campaign run by the Republican county chairman was "joined by un-Republican critics," including the student-run university newspaper. "Some of the county's most ardent segregationists were singing in the same chorus with such opponents as the Malcolm X Black Power front. … that lack of commissioner districts failed to give them influence they would like to have" (Johnson 1971, 1).

Alternative Proposals
A related strategy that is often employed by political winners is to suggest alternative proposals to split a potential majority for the current proposal. Opponents of consolidation may effectively use this strategy to defend their position by suggesting other, less radical changes as alternatives. Introducing options to a proposed consolidation is a strategy to capitalize on existing preferences for these other approaches, such as regional planning, interlocal service agreements, functional consolidation, or the establishment of regional authorities. Indeed, there are numerous examples of communities turning to these alternatives following the rejection of city–county consolidation. Macon–Bibb County, Georgia (Fleischmann 2000),

and Louisville–Jefferson County, Kentucky (Savitch and Vogel 2004), are two examples of communities where reliance on interlocal service contracts expanded following the rejection of city–county consolidation. In the Louisville–Jefferson County case, this strategy was eventually overcome when the consolidation advocates reframed the problem from redundant services to economic development in 2000 (Savitch and Vogel 2004).

The effort to consolidate Jacksonville and Duval County, Florida, in 1967 featured an alternative proposal that led the black community to favor consolidation. During the referendum campaign, the local legislative delegation was preparing a legislative bill that would annex all populated areas adjacent to Jacksonville if the consolidation referendum failed (*Florida Times Union* 1967a). Opponents to the consolidation preferred the less radical alternative of annexation (Swanson 2004), but leaders in Jacksonville's black community endorsed consolidation and organized a committee to convince black voters to vote support consolidation (*Florida Times Union* 1967b, 1967c). Opening up the alternative of expansion through annexation meant that the black community had little to lose in consolidation despite the fact that their proportion of the electorate would diminish. Even without annexation, black representation was only 2 of 12 city council seats and none of the five county commission seats (Swanson 2004).

Rule Manipulation
A third strategy used by political winners and losers alike is to win by attempting to control the decision-making process. This can be done in any of three different arenas in which the rules can be used to great effect to win by shaping the issue. The first is the arena in which consolidation is put onto the local agenda. Depending on the laws of the state, this may require the councils of the affected governments to enact an ordinance producing a charter or a charter committee, or the state legislature may have to pass a law creating one or both of these. In some instances, the state constitution must be amended to permit residents to decide on city–county consolidation. Leland and Thurmaier acknowledge the importance of state-level rules but do not account for endogenous processes by which certain interests strategically use institutional rules to influence the consolidation decisions. Yet it is well known that outcomes are not independent of procedural rules (Riker 1986), and this fact provides both opportunities and challenges to participants seeking to control the agenda. For example, rules stipulating how city–county consolidation may be put on the local agenda are often biased toward the status quo, meaning that proponents have a relatively more difficult time getting these proposals on the agenda. In some instances, however, a few sympathetic council members or legislators may be

sufficient to overcome the bias toward the status quo imparted by the procedures.

Once consolidation is on the agenda, two other arenas offer opportunities for rule manipulation. Participants may seek to affect the outcome by strategically using the rules guiding the creation of the committee charged with writing the charter and defining the process for approving or rejecting the proposed charter (Johnson and Feiock 1999). For example, an opponent of the effort may seek to exclude county residents from the charter-writing process but include them in the referendum on the charter, thereby ensuring its defeat. Another example is the use of sequential voting, whereby participants vote for a charter they do not support in order to send a less desirable charter to the electorate.

Deciding how the votes for consolidation in Athens and Clarke County, Georgia, were to be tallied provides an illustration of heresthetical rule manipulations. In the 1982 effort, city officials sought an election rule requiring that city voters be included in the tabulation of the county vote, and county officials worked to limit participation to those in the county's unincorporated areas (Adair 1981). The maneuvering in 1982 largely mirrored the struggle over how the votes would be counted in the 1969 and 1972 efforts, and in all three instances, opponents were able to obtain a requirement for separate majorities in the city and unincorporated county (Durning, Gillespie, and Campbell 2004). In the 1990 effort, consolidation proponents were able to secure election rules requiring majorities in the city and the *entire* county (not just the unincorporated areas), and the consolidation was approved (Durning, Gillespie, and Campbell 2004).

Turning Losers into Winners (and Vice Versa)
City–county consolidation is part of an ongoing struggle in which different interests seek to institutionalize their preferences in the structure of local government. Supporters and opponents use heresthetical strategies to exploit latent attitudes in the community as they struggle over this issue. The claims they make often have little to do with the actual effects of the proposed reorganization, but this is largely irrelevant. Leland and Thurmaier effectively demonstrate the limitations of Rosenbaum and Kammerer's work, but like them, they suggest a silver-bullet prescription for consolidation success—in this case, it is economic development. This is unfortunate because it misses the fundamental dynamic of these events. Instead, we see the outcome as a result of strategic efforts to frame the issue and control the decision-making process. Whether it is seen as "creative destruction" (Shepsle 2003), "revolutionary change" (Johnson 2004a), or something else, city–county consolidation is not about efficiency, racial division, or even economic development. It is fundamentally

about political losers trying to be winners and the current winners trying to prevent this turn of events.

In some communities, contemporary consolidation proponents have gained strategic advantage by associating city–county consolidation with preferences for increased economic development. In the earlier models, race was used in the same way that Leland and Thurmaier's model uses economic development. The Rosenbaum and Kammerer formulation emphasized government incapacity and corruption but also the role played by racial division. The success of consolidation efforts during the 1960s was likely the result of proponents successfully exploiting racial tensions in the community by suggesting that consolidation would be an effective mechanism to stunt growing African American political power or to prevent African Americans from ever gaining significant power. Today, proponents are more likely to suggest that economic development will be enhanced. However, it is not the substance of economic development issues that is important in the cases Leland and Thurmaier review; it is the exploitation of latent attitudes. The efficacy of emphasizing the economic development dimension depends on latent altitudes in the community and other elements of the strategic situation. The specific latent attitudes available to be exploited for the support or opposition to city–county consolidation are likely to vary across communities and over time.

Recent empirical analysis based on a qualitative comparative analysis of survey responses from city managers and planning directors in 33 communities that had consolidation efforts provides strong support for this interpretation (Johnson and Carr 2004). This work demonstrates that the combinations of claims made about the likely effects of consolidation vary enormously from one community to the next, and neither economic development nor any other single set of claims emerges as key to the rejection or approval of the charter. Framing consolidation efforts in terms of heresthetics provides not only a stronger theoretical foundation but also greater generalizability because this framework has application to both consolidation and to local government reform and reorganization more generally.

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