

# **When Efficiency is Unbelievable: Normative Lessons from 30 Years of City-County Consolidations**

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## **ABSTRACT**

We use a new model of city-county consolidation to analyze twelve local government consolidations attempted in the last three decades. Using a rigorously designed comparative case study, we identify the critical variables that explain why some consolidations are successful and others fail. We find that arguments for consolidation fail when based on the increased equity to be gained in a redistribution of revenues from suburban to central cities. Traditional arguments based on increased efficiency from merging two bureaucracies are also unsuccessful. Instead, we find that the essential elements of a successful consolidation attempt are civic elites who are able to define the economic development vision for the community, determine that the existing political structure of multiple, competing jurisdictions is incapable of supporting and implementing that vision, and then successfully convince the voters that city-county consolidation is the key to economic development that will benefit the whole community, not just elites.

## **Introduction**

The local government landscape is changing. Local governments' role in providing what gets what from government has greatly increased with the devolution era at the turn of the century. Even so, governments are struggling in the face of cutbacks in federal and state assistance, declining revenues, and amidst taxpayer revolts. Efficiency, effectiveness, and equity are at the forefront of discussions about local government management. In response to this dilemma, public managers and citizens have renewed interest in looking at local government consolidation as a solution to increasing government efficiency and effectiveness to meet citizen demands for more services without increasing property taxes. Elected councils cast their nets for alternative government structures as city managers and public employees struggle to "do more with less." Still others turn to consolidation to redistribute resources from suburbs to central cities that are falling further behind as they face greater fiscal stress than other municipalities.

Yet, it is widely known that the vast majority of consolidation efforts fail. Some efforts are doomed before they even make the referendum ballot. Although hundreds of local government consolidation attempts have reached the referendum stage or have been passed by state legislatures, only thirty-four have been successfully implemented since the New Orleans case in 1805. While the idea of reforming two local governments via a merger sounds enticing, the majority of these efforts fail either during the process of drafting a charter or once they reach the ballot. Consolidation of city and counties occurs less than 15 percent of the time. There have only been five successful passages since 1990.

What accounts for such a high failure rate of such a popularly debated reform? The classic consolidation model developed by Rosenbaum and Kammerer (1974), asserts that consolidation prevails only under rare circumstances. They describe three necessary stages. First, they suggested a crisis climate is necessary to precipitate such a radical reform. The inadequate or errant response of local authorities to the crises leads to the rejection of the local government structure (power deflation) by unhappy civic elites, and a catalytic event accelerates the consolidation debate and moves the voting public to support city-county consolidation. It is worth noting that increased efficiency was not seen as a critical element of the Rosenbaum and Kammerer article. The activities giving rise to consolidation had more to do with the ineffectual response of governments to problems than gains in government efficiency. This paper challenges this widely accepted model by proposing a new framework and empirically assessing it. We conclude by offering an alternative explanation for the high rate of failure of consolidation attempts.

## **The C3 Model of Local Government Consolidation**

Although the Rosenbaum and Kammerer model [hereafter the R&K model] has received considerable attention (Durning and Campbell 1998, Johnson and Feiock 1999, Messinger 1989, Feiock and Carr 1999, and Thurmaier and Leland 2000), it is not without limitations. There have been several suggestions for modifications, most importantly Messinger (1989), Johnson and Feiock (1999), and Feiock and Carr (1999). First, the R&K model does not extend beyond getting a referendum on a ballot (Johnson and Feiock 1999). Second, the R&K model gives sparse attention to the roles of civic elites who play key roles in consolidation efforts (Feiock and Carr 1999, Fleischman 2000). Third, the R&K model neglects the institutional context within which consolidation efforts happen, including the statutory framework and socio-economic and political factors of the communities.

We synthesized and augmented the R&K model with the suggested revisions to the model made by Messinger (1989), Johnson and Feiock (1999), and Feiock and Carr (1999),

among others, to answer these critical questions. Our city-county consolidation model (hereafter the C<sup>3</sup> model) synthesizes this literature and transforms the extended stages patterns of the previous work into a set of measurable criteria that apply to each of the consolidation movements that have reached a referendum in the United States over the last century. In brief, we expand and modify the basic R&K model in five important ways.

First, we give ex ante attention to the institutional framework in which the consolidation efforts will occur, something largely ignored by Rosenbaum and Kammerer and subsequent work. We put particular emphasis on the importance of each state's legal framework that might inhibit or enhance consolidation efforts. Second, we expand the characteristic alternative government responses in the R&K model to include voter alienation (Messinger 1989). Third, we emphasize the impact that specific charter provisions may have on provoking specific interest group attitudes (elite or non-elite) toward the proposed charter, which may then result in active participation (for or against) in the ensuing consolidation referendum campaign. Fourth, we append a referendum campaign stage suggested by Messinger (1989) and Johnson and Feiock (1999) to the end of the basic R&K model and divide the consolidation process into two parts. Part One focuses on elite agenda-setting activities that culminate (or not) in a consolidated government charter proposal that is presented to voters. Part Two focuses on the election campaigns for and against the proposed charter, culminating in the referendum itself.

Finally, we heighten attention to the role that civic elites play in the consolidation reform effort throughout the process, both in leading to a charter proposal and in the campaign to gain voter approval. We expect that whether they are united or divided matters. We expect that which elites become consolidation entrepreneurs matters for the success or failure of the actual referendum campaign. In general, we expect that the politics that lead to a charter proposal are not necessarily the same politics that contribute to successful passage of the proposal in a referendum. "It is likely that the actors interested in—and capable of—accessing the local policy agenda are different from those able and willing to pursue a county-wide referendum" (Feiock and Carr 1999). In short, the two stages, while interdependent, are distinct.

Figure 1 presents the different elements of the C<sup>3</sup> model. Despite the arrows suggesting otherwise, we do not regard the C<sup>3</sup> model as a path-dependent model (North 1990). The stages are interdependent. Later stages are dependent upon previous events. On the other hand, one of the important characteristics of successful consolidation efforts is that the frequency of consolidation failure in a particular county often corresponds to repeated attempts by advocates to achieve a successful referendum vote. In that sense, initial stages of the latest round of reform efforts are likely related to the later stages of a previous reform effort in the county. The complexity of the consolidation process requires a rigorous qualitative research design that can withstand these validity challenges.

<<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

### **Methods: Systematic Comparative Case Analysis**

The comparative case study of governmental consolidations in the United States is a classic problem of many potential explanatory variables and a relatively small N. Lijphart suggests there are basically two approaches to the many variables, small-N problem. One can maximize the number of cases and statistically manipulate the data in order to test empirical hypotheses while control is exercised by means of partial correlation, or, one can select comparable cases for analysis and achieve a large measure of control as a result of their comparability (Lijphart 1975, 163). The crucial issue for a successful comparative case method is "the ratio between the amount of variance of the operative variables and the amount of variance of the control variables,

which is assumed to be zero, but is essentially uncontrolled. This ratio should be as large as possible” (ibid.). The suggested remedy is to minimize variance in the control variables while maximizing the variance in the independent variables. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 127) accept this strategy, noting that “selecting observations for inclusion in a study according to the categories of the key causal explanatory variables causes no inference problems.” However, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) argue that the first rule in the small-N, nonrandom sample study is selection for variation on the dependent variable. In the case of consolidation research, the dependent variable is whether the reform effort results in a vote to consolidate the governments or not, and the implication is that the sample of cases should reflect both successful and unsuccessful reform efforts.

Lijphart (1975, 172–3) defends the comparative case methodology against three major criticisms. The first criticism relates to over determination of the sample. Although the number of differences among similar cases may be limited, it will often be sufficiently large to overdetermine the dependent phenomenon. That is, it may be difficult to find a sufficient number of similar cases. Second, the comparative method is criticized for leading to no more than partial generalizations when the search is for more universal generalizations. Finally, the comparative case method is criticized because the rarity of comparable cases forces the researcher to design hypotheses to fit the sample rather than some general model. Lijphart agrees that these issues can be problems, but he counters that the methodology requires a careful selection of cases, that even partial generalizations are a step toward building a useful theory, and that dysfunctional formation of hypotheses is no more likely in the comparative case methodology as in any statistical methodology. We believe in fact, that the comparative case model may even provide additional value towards further developing the framework in analyzing consolidation attempts by falsification of some of the variables that we theorize matter. For example, by analyzing a successful case where some of the stages are missing or are skipped, we could develop a more valid framework for analyzing future cases.

A carefully designed systematic comparative case study of consolidation efforts promises great benefits to our understanding of local government reforms. First, case studies are rich in details, and the nuances of a specific case enrich the exposition of the reform effort in that particular place in that particular time. We agree that “most useful social science theories are valid under particular conditions. . . or in particular settings” (King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994, 103). Second, the research design can measure each case against the testable (i.e., falsifiable) hypotheses embedded in the causal model. From each “unique” case one seeks to extract the systematic component hypothesized in the model to lead to a predictable outcome. Each case that contradicts a given hypothesis forces the model to be re-evaluated and modified. Each consolidation case selected into the sample for this project probes the boundaries of the causal model’s legitimacy, leading us to better specify the bounds of applicability of the theory or hypothesis.

The analysis of 12 consolidation cases below was made possible with the cooperation of several colleagues who each submitted case analyses to us that rigorously followed the elements of the C<sup>3</sup> model. We then analyzed the validity of the C<sup>3</sup> model with respect to the variation in each of the C<sup>3</sup> variables across the cases. The individual case analyses listed in Table 1 will be forthcoming in Leland and Thurmaier (forthcoming in 2004), and we are grateful to them for their contributions to the project.<sup>1</sup> We now examine each of the variables presented in Figure 1 in light of the 12 cases in our sample.

<<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

## **Findings: An Assessment of the C3 Model**

### **Agenda Setting**

***The Institutional Framework (v1).*** We examined several institutional aspects that frame the process and actors attempting a consolidation and did not find any that affected the ability of the consolidation proponents to obtain a successful consolidation vote. First, we did not find any effects from the nature of state consolidation laws and the federal Voting Rights Act.

We found that state enabling legislation is not always helpful. In fact, it may hinder the chances of passage of consolidation. In Tennessee, voters amended the state constitution in 1953, allowing consolidation to be an option for all city and county governments in the states. This is one of the few states that has actually codified a comprehensive process in state law; and yet the process has only produced two consolidated governments. A considerable obstacle in this legislation is a provision that requires two separate votes for the consolidation. One referendum is voted countywide on the question of whether there should be consolidation. It must pass in both the principal city and county. A second referendum is voted only by citizens in the minor municipalities on the question of their level of involvement in the unified government. If either referendum fails, the consolidation attempt fails, and there is a mandatory three-year moratorium on the formation of a new charter commission. In sum, we do not see a systematic barrier to consolidation based on the legal framework found in the Southern states versus other regions of the country. Nor do we find the legal frameworks in these cases to be substantial barriers to successful consolidation. Nor did the degree of home rule powers matter for success (e.g., the Sacramento, CA and Knoxville, TN cases).

Neither the number of minor municipalities in the county nor the number of local governments involved in the county consolidation matters for success. Nor did the homogeneity of a community matter for a successful consolidation. Other confounding entities such as municipal utilities or school districts were usually off the table as non-issues. There was no other case in our sample that did not exclude or maintain their existing arrangement for publicly owned power companies or public schools.<sup>3</sup>

The minimal variation in the factors explored in the institutional framework suggests that the explanations for consolidation success and failure lie in other variables. It is particularly important to note that while race relations and protecting minority representation is a critical legal issue in Southern states, it is not exclusively a “Southern” issue simply because those states are subject to the federal Voting Rights Act. That was not a significant barrier to most consolidation attempts. Moreover, the discussion of minority representation is very important to the Kansas case and irrelevant to the Tennessee case. All of the communities have had a very lengthy history of proposing consolidation. Each case demonstrates that the prior history and reoccurring appearance of consolidation on the ballot tends to teach reformers valuable lessons and help the referendum to achieve ballot status. It likely aided passage in about half of the cases. In short, a successful consolidation must depend on other factors than the legal framework and the other issues discussed above.

***A Crisis Climate (v2).*** We did not find support for the hypothesis that the crisis climate required by the R&K model (Figure 1) was required in order for consolidation to pass in a referendum. The crisis climate stage is marked by the onset of one or more civic problems such as substantial changes in population, racial or ethnic composition, the quality or quantity of the services delivered, the decay of cities, or the comparative decline of resources of the core cities. We found that at least one of these conditions was discernable in most of the successful cases, but that many times the case analysis did not reveal the problem to be at a “crisis” level. While a

crisis climate was noticeably absent in four of the failed cases (Knoxville, Tallahassee, Des Moines, and Sacramento), it was also absent in successful cases such as Columbus, GA; Lafayette, LA; and Athens, GA. There is even skepticism that the problems were at a crisis level in Jacksonville, FL.

Further analysis reveals that the underlying “problem” in three of the five failed cases was growth pains, not economic decline (Tallahassee, FL; Sacramento, CA; and Wilmington, NC). None of the successful cases identified managing growth pains as a problem that eventually triggered a successful consolidation proposal and a vote. Indeed, long-term economic decline was explicitly cited as a significant problem in at least three of the successful cases.

Savitch and Vogel (forthcoming) target an important issue that is pertinent to most or all the consolidation cases we study in this book. The issue is measuring the “crisis climate” as an objective reality or as an artifact of perception—created and sustained by civic elites to further the cause of city-county consolidation. Swanson (forthcoming) even suggests that the crisis climate identified by R&K in the Jacksonville case was more an artifact of manufactured perception than objective reality. Campbell and Durning (forthcoming) remind us that the C<sup>3</sup> variables are not dichotomous, that it is rather hard to discern their strength or their presence. They conclude that problems in Athens, Georgia were no more numerous, nor more onerous, than the same problems in other cities in Georgia. The key issue concerning us is how the civic elites use these problems to develop support for consolidation.

Reading across the 12 cases in this study, one is struck by the “normalcy” of the problems to be addressed by city-county consolidation. “Annexation wars” are a recurrent theme in the sections on crisis climate, yet these are hardly unique among thousands of American local governments. Is it the scale of the annexations, perhaps? It is difficult to find some “tipping point” at which the annexation issue moves from problem to crisis. Yet, it is clear that annexation problems are a common drumbeat for consolidation.

There are other problems at the roots of our consolidation cases. In Des Moines, IA and the Kansas City, KS case, economic decline of the central city and the arguments for sharing the tax burden are at the fore. Yet these two cases have radically different stories. In Kansas City, KS, the city and county borders were nearly coterminous and the consolidators focused their argument on tax relief and economic revival by targeting the county government as wasteful and unaccountable. In effect, they argued that the structure of competing city and county governments was broken, unable to meet the demands of citizens for economic revival; therefore consolidating the unprofessional, inept county government into the professional, council-manager form city was the economic salvation tool.

In contrast, consolidation in Des Moines could not make similar arguments, although economic conditions were also problematic. Des Moines was not coterminous with Polk County. Moreover, the wealthier suburbs showed no inclination to accept Rusk’s (1995) argument that they shared a common economic destiny with the central city. In fact, that argument was rarely made by Des Moines elites. Their drumbeat in 1995 (and their drumbeat continues in 2003) was about efficiency and economy. That message continues to fall on deaf ears.

Governmental Response to Demands for Change (v3)

We did not find that citizens demand a governmental response to the problems that have achieved crisis proportions (Figure 1). First, we note that it is difficult to identify the governmental response to a crisis when there is little evidence to suggest a crisis. Second, in those cases where a crisis-response phenomenon is apparent, they suggest that there is a complex relationship between governmental response and passage or failure of consolidation in those

cases. While some governments responded to the crisis climate or perceived crisis climate, they only addressed some of the problems and not all of the issues, and therefore motivations for consolidation persisted.

Our careful review of the 12 cases suggests that consolidation is rarely about economy and efficiency, and even more rarely about achieving equity between the inner city and suburbs. Arguments about efficiency gains from consolidation have fallen on deaf ears (as in Des Moines, IA) or have been rejected or refuted by well-organized opposition campaigns (as in Sacramento, CA). Arguments for equity meet hostility.

Power Deflation (v4) and Accelerator Events (v5)

Without crisis there is little chance of the power deflation indicated by the  $C^3$  model. Power deflation is an intense and increased lack of confidence in the governing structure by citizens. Citizens perceive something is seriously wrong with the basic organization and operation of local government and support the creation of a consolidation study commission to explore alternative government restructuring (Rosenbaum and Kammerer 1974, 25). One of our most interesting and valuable findings is that power deflation and an accelerator event are not necessary precursors for consolidation to get on the ballot as the original R&K model posited.

Power deflation was not present at this stage in the process (Figure 1) in several of the cases in our sample that proceeded to the creation of the study commission. This was true in Athens, GA; Lafayette, LA; Louisville, KY; Des Moines, IA; Wilmington, NC; and Knoxville, TN. Interestingly, consolidation passed in half of these communities despite the lack of power deflation. Moreover, sometimes creation of a study commission occurred two years before a referendum was held; it often looked more like a starting point for consolidation attempts than a penultimate step in the process.

After power deflation, Rosenbaum and Kammerer argued that the last milestone toward a successful consolidation referendum is the accelerator event. This is an event that convinces voters to go to the polls and vote for consolidation, including (1) a scandal; (2) a community emergency; (3) a distinguished source of external criticism; or (4) a sudden loss of an influential leader who is closely associated with the present form of government. Our analysis suggests that accelerator events are not required for successful consolidations. For example, we found the presence of a scandal in Jacksonville, FL and Augusta, GA that helped consolidation prevail at the polls. However, we found a scandal in Des Moines, IA that did not convince voters to pass consolidation. Pointedly, all of the cases in our sample involved the creation of a consolidation study commission despite the lack of power deflation and accelerator events; an accelerator was not present in any of the cases where consolidation failed at the polls.

***Assessing the  $C^3$  Model with Respect to Agenda Setting.*** It is now evident that the agenda setting aspects of the  $C^3$  model, relying on the core Rosenbaum and Kammerer model with the addition of an institutional framework, are not reliable predictors of consolidation success. The evidence is mixed, at best, about the existence and influence of a crisis climate that provokes citizens to demand change and governments to try (or not) to accommodate their demands. There is scant evidence that accelerator events are necessary to get a consolidation attempt on the community's decision agenda. So, if consolidations are not about crises, what accounts for their prominence on the decision agendas of these and other communities? How ought we to modify the  $C^3$  model to improve its predictability of getting consolidation on the community's decision agenda? The answer lies in two parts: how elites set the agenda and how the campaign for consolidation is structured.

**The Shift from Developmental Politics to Constitutional Politics**

It seems clear from our 12 cases that—win or lose—consolidation attempts are creations of civic elites who see consolidation as the solution to a problem. The common thread, we believe, is that the underlying problem they identify is *economic development*. Sharp (1990) argues that economic development can mean many things to many people. For most involved in promoting consolidation efforts, economic development means improving the overall quality of life in a region by reforming the existing local government structure. Economic development to such reformers triggers the images described by Rusk (1993) and Peterson (1995), one of growing communities, communities with an abundance of job opportunities, communities with high-paying/attractive jobs, and communities that have a diversified, resilient base to adapt to changing economic circumstances. Our cases indicate that a sizeable corps of the elites reach agreement that the economic vitality and future of the community (regardless of political boundaries) is tied to a unified plan, a unified voice to meet with the state and federal legislators, and a unified voice to speak with prospective businesses who they hope will energize and re-energize the community.

The difficult road to success lies in careful management of two aspects of consolidation we have not yet addressed: first, in crafting a charter that meets the economic development needs without losing political support for key constituents and without violating principles of the federal Voting Rights Act (in Southern cases); and second, in crafting a campaign message that resonates with the average citizen voters instead of alienating them or asking them to suspend their understanding of local government operations. In short, successful consolidation attempts involve civic elites who craft a vision of the economic development future of the community, craft a restructured local government organization to effectively implement the economic development plan, and convince enough of the average citizens that the current structure is unable to achieve the economic vision that they are persuaded is the key to their own economic futures. How do they do it?

Juxtaposing the Louisville case with the Knoxville case provides a useful contrast that is found throughout the volume. Savitch and Vogel (forthcoming) argue most pointedly that civic elites in Louisville were convinced of the need for consolidation as a key to the community's economic future—and successfully created the *impression* that Louisville faced a crisis if it did not retain its status as the largest city in Kentucky. The scenario they portrayed was one of economic decline versus economic growth. They also structured their campaign for consolidation around this message more than around arguments of efficiency and economy, insulating the pro-consolidation campaign against opposition charges that the efficiency and economy gains were immaterial. In effect—they were! This is because the singular issue was really about the economic future of the community, not how efficient it was.

The Knoxville case, in contrast, began with civic elites creating a campaign that touted efficiency. They argued consolidation was wise because it would reduce taxes, the size of government, and eliminate duplication between the city and county. While economic growth was cited from time to time, this was not the major focus of the campaign. They did not even try to convince voters that there was a community crisis that could be solved via consolidation. The opponents of consolidation were not well organized or well funded. Yet in the end, the opponents of consolidation prevailed because the proponents of consolidation focused their campaign on the efficiency of merging the two governments, an argument that was difficult to prove and even harder to sell to voters.

However, before we delve deeply into the campaigns for and against consolidation, it is important to study the actual elements of the consolidation charters, as these are often at the

center of the debate. We demonstrate below that civic elites who have pushed the process of consolidation to the point of a study commission need to shift perspectives from development politics to constitutional politics, the politics of what the new unified government will look like and how it will work.

***Creation of Consolidation Study Commissions.*** Our analysis of these 12 consolidation cases supports Linda Johnson's contention that the proposed charter provisions matter in the process of consolidation much more than the power deflation or accelerator events (Johnson, forthcoming). A successful charter that avoids "poison pills" is a necessary, but insufficient condition for consolidation success at the polls. We now examine these proposed constitutional provisions with a critical eye on those that we believe were the most influential in affecting the passage or defeat of the consolidation attempt. Many of the consolidation entrepreneurs were aware of potential "show stoppers" and in many cases, they manipulated these variables to improve the chances of consolidation passage. There are several provisions in the charter that can act as potential barriers to the passage of consolidation. This was particularly true with regard to the retention of the sheriff's office as an elected position.

***The Sheriff.*** Our analysis of the thirteen cases consistently found that the largest pitfall for pro-consolidation forces was the status of the sheriff in the proposed new government. If the sheriff were to remain elected with his (or her) duties intact, citizens were more likely to support consolidation. If the charter called for the sheriff to move from an elected position to an appointed position, charter politics proved to be a "show stopper." It is truly one of the single most volatile issues in consolidation charters. This was the case in Tallahassee, FL, Des Moines, IA, and Wilmington, NC (the 1987 failed attempt only), all cases in which consolidation did not pass. In Knoxville, the charter called for the sheriff's duties to be reduced to include only the jailing function that eroded support for consolidation. In Louisville, KY, as in Sacramento, CA, the consolidation legislation left the sheriff's position intact.

The problems of consolidating the law enforcement function are somewhat paradoxical in that there are increasing technical efficiencies to be gained in combining city and county policing functions, as witnessed in unified 911 dispatch centers. Indeed, there have been several cases of functional consolidations outside of full political consolidations. Prior to the political consolidations, Athens, GA and Kansas City, KS had reorganized the public safety function by assigning the elected sheriff to administer the county jail and protect the courts and by assigning the police chief to administer traffic enforcement and criminal detective work. When political consolidation moved to the political agenda of these communities, the sheriff remained neutral since it did not substantially affect the pre-existing arrangement. Thus, in Kansas City, KS, the consolidation study commission recognized that the sheriff needed to remain elected from studying previous consolidation attempts, and decided to leave the office alone in order to reduce opposition to consolidation.

The sheriff in the failed 1995 Wilmington, NC case illustrates an interesting twist. The sheriff was slated to become the chief law enforcement officer for the unified government. Upon his retirement, the position would shift from an elected office to an appointed one. This scenario actually provoked opposition within the city because some people feared the prospect of the sheriff replacing the professional police chief. In North Carolina, sheriff's need only be elected; they do not need any professional qualifications for the office, in contrast to police chiefs. When the community revisited consolidation again in 2001, part of the reason consolidation was brought back on the agenda was because this particular sheriff had retired. There was a feeling among

county officials that the newly elected sheriff opened a window of opportunity to get consolidation passed.

***Assurances for Public Employees.*** A related aspect of charter politics is how the new government would treat public employees. The status of the most powerful employee groups—the deputy sheriffs and city police officers—is central to the issues regarding the transition for public employees in a unified government. One such problem emerged in the case of Kansas City, KS. County employees (including those in the sheriff’s office) were hired and fired via an antiquated patronage system. City employees were under a professional classification system. A sticking point of consolidation was how the two systems would merge. Would the Democratic political machine give up its patronage power? Would county employees now be subject to layoffs once their position descriptions were more clearly defined and monitored? One can see how such unanswered questions would produce potential opposition to a new, unified personnel structure.

More generally, many public employees fear that the projected reduction in duplication between the city and county under merger would also lead to layoffs. In Athens, GA and Kansas City, KS, the charters had a provision that all existing employees would retain their jobs. Layoffs would occur only through attrition. This seemed to reduce opposition from public employees to consolidation. In Augusta, GA, there was no guarantee of jobs for existing city and county employees, but salaries would remain the same. This also helped quell opposition to consolidation among public employees. In Knoxville, TN, the unified personal system as outlined in the proposed charter would have lowered civil service protection for workers. This added to the opposition of consolidation among public employees.

***Taxation.*** Taxation has been a big issue in charter politics. All of the successful consolidation case charters (except Kansas City, KS and Louisville, KY) created separate urban and rural service districts which essentially reflected the different levels of tax burdens used to support different public services levels throughout the county. In Wilmington, NC, this was actually required by the state of North Carolina’s enabling legislation. In the case of Columbus, GA, Sacramento, CA and Tallahassee, FL separate service districts were created in the charter.

In several of the successful cases (e.g., Augusta, GA; Louisville, KY; Jacksonville, FL; and Kansas City, KS) the charters called for some sort of moratorium on tax increases or set targets to reduce expenditures. The Louisville legislation, however, froze the rates until the new council chose to change them, and it was free to change them at will. In the Kansas City, KS case, the charter included a provision that pledged to lower the overall tax burden on residents in both the city and county over a period of ten years. However, this was also true in several of the consolidation attempts that did not pass, such as Tallahassee, FL and Sacramento, CA. It is interesting to note that analysis of the Knoxville, TN case indicated that a three-year moratorium on tax increases and a freezing of the existing service levels actually hurt the support for the consolidation charter because the public viewed this as dishonest. Perceptions matter.

Avoiding the assumption of debt was essential in the cases where consolidation passed. In Lafayette, LA; Augusta, GA; and Kansas City, KS, (all in which consolidation passed) original debt burdens were essentially kept separate. In the failed cases of Des Moines, IA and Knoxville, TN, debt was not retained by the original entity that incurred it. Analysis of these cases suggests that a status quo provision reduces opposition to consolidation.

***Status of Minor Municipalities Specified in Proposed Charter.*** Civic elites who are pursuing consolidation following an economic development rationale do not require the political inclusion of minor municipalities in the county. Their focus is on consolidation of the major city and

county organizations and tax bases to plan, implement and support the community's economic development. Unified city-county planning and zoning, for example, reduces development transactions costs and increases predictability of governmental responses to development proposals because of the reduced number of actors required for approval.

Consequently, minor municipalities were excluded or allowed to opt out of the merged government even though they still retained the right to vote on the consolidation referenda. Some even retained representation in the new unified government. In all thirty-four cases of city-county consolidation in the United States since 1805, there has never been a case in which a minor municipality has chosen to join the newly unified city-county government. This includes the seven cases in our sample in which consolidation was enacted.

The defeat of consolidation proposals in Des Moines, IA; Sacramento, CA; and Tallahassee, FL in contrast, can be partly attributed to mandatory inclusion of minor municipalities and unincorporated townships in the proposed unified government. Both the Des Moines and the Sacramento charters included a metropolitan-federalism structure that produced a core of council seats representing the unified government, plus seats representing each of the other political entities in the county. The Tallahassee charter called for the inclusion of all of the unincorporated townships in Leon County including the town of Woodville, which had recently tried to incorporate to avoid being included in the proposed merger.

The dubious political feasibility of including all minor municipalities in a consolidation is reiterated by Peterson's functional theory of intergovernmental finance (1995). A consolidation attempting to incorporate a wealthier tax base is likely to be politically infeasible at the local level because it involves the redistribution of resources to the inner city from the suburbs. If reformers argue for taxpayer equity between city and county residents by incorporating minor suburban municipalities via consolidation, they will surely be disappointed. There appears to be a limit to what local governments can do in the area of redistribution of wealth between inner cities and suburbs. The principle dates to at least Oates' (1972) treatise on governmental finance, and it is perilous for reformers to ignore it.

**Proposed Council Structure.** There are two aspects of council structure that concern consolidation reformers. The first is the actual size of the consolidated council. The second is its political structure. We find that neither the size nor the structure of the new council for the consolidated government appears to be a significant variable affecting the success of a consolidation referendum. Most consolidation charters decreased the total number of elected council representatives. It was an opportunity for the voters to see clear financial savings in terms of salaries; and fewer representatives on one body clarifies who could be held accountable for decisions. However, since both successful and unsuccessful cases reduced the number of representatives, we conclude that this provision neither increases nor decreases the likelihood of consolidation passage.

The three structural choices for unified councils have been a consolidated council of only district representatives, a consolidated council of only at-large seats, or a consolidated council with some mix of the two. The successful consolidation charters included three mixed structures and four district structures. Among the failed consolidations there were four district structures and one mixed structure.

Below the surface of the structural descriptions, however, one finds in these cases that the more critical aspects of council structures relate to *how* districts or super-districts are drawn. Hand in hand with converting at-large local representation by council members to a district or mixed structure representation is the preservation of the number of minority-majority district

seats (particularly in consolidation cases with a large African-American population in the South). Diversity plays an important role in consolidation charter politics, particularly in the South. Our case analyses suggest that if the perception of enough voters is that minority representation will not be preserved by the new consolidation charter, there will be substantial opposition generated against consolidation.

This is an especially important component in the Southern cases that require approval by the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ) under the federal Voting Rights Act. The Augusta, GA case analysis by Durning, Gillespie, and Campbell (forthcoming) notes that a key feature distinguishing the 1988 and the 1995 consolidation referenda is that the 1988 consolidation vote was vetoed by the USDOJ because it was held to be in violation of the Voting Rights Act; the 1995 consolidation vote was not. As noted earlier, the undercurrents of race relations appear in multiple cases, and the importance of protecting minority interests is not restricted to the South. The reformers in Kansas City, KS carefully crafted districts to insure that the potential representation of African-Americans in a “unified government” would likely be the same or greater than the proportion of seats held on the city and county councils at the time of the consolidation vote, thereby minimizing opposition to consolidation by the minority groups in the community. We found that in most of the cases, there was an attempt to preserve minority representation. The exceptions were Des Moines, IA and Knoxville, TN where there were small minority populations and no minority member seats to protect. This suggests that preserving proportional minority representation is a necessary condition for passage.

**Chief Executive.** Without exception, the consolidation charters in these 12 cases proposed a county executive, elected at-large, to head the unified government. The title is usually “mayor,” but also appears as chief executive officer (as in Augusta, GA). This particular provision is telling of the motives underlying many reform efforts. If the ultimate goal is a unified approach to economic development for the community, a unified executive branch is an effective way to develop and implement that vision. It provides a singular voice to present to state and federal legislative delegations, a singular point of reference for negotiations with prospective business developers, and a unified chain of command to manage the governmental apparatus necessary to plan and implement the economic development vision.

The powers of the new executive are sometimes the heart of the debate (if it is not the status of the sheriff). The relative powers of the CEO can also be entangled with the charismatic mayor or county leader, particularly when it is clear that the mayor aspires to be the mayor of the unified government. Term limits were essential ingredients in cases where citizens were concerned about the strength of the CEO.

**Charter Summary.** Successfully crafted consolidation charters are necessary but insufficient conditions for a successful consolidation vote. The critical feature overall is that the proposed charter cannot contain any “poison pills.” Foremost among these is changing the sheriff from an elected to an appointed position or substantially reducing the sheriff’s duties without the sheriff’s consent. Unhappy sheriffs have consistently made very effective opposition leaders. Perhaps second in rank for poison pills is the future status of minority representation in the new government when there is significant minority representation to protect in the city or county councils before the consolidation vote. It is especially critical that consolidation plans in Southern states not run afoul of the federal VRA. Finally, all of the successful consolidations create separate tax and service districts that protect newly united “neighbors” from assuming each other’s pre-existing debt. (In the Louisville, KY case, legislation was passed shortly *after* the merger to authorize the metropolitan council to create an urban service district, which it did.)

One can call this feature a prenuptial agreement for consolidations. Failure to avoid any of these pitfalls would seem to lead to certain defeat at the polls (or at USDOJ).

Aside from avoiding “show stoppers,” our analysis suggests the creation of relatively strong countywide CEOs is a common tactic for consolidation reformers. It belies the underlying rationale for most of the reforms studied in this sample: to unify government operations for the benefit of an economic development vision for the greater community. But as Nownes and Houston note (forthcoming), “it is far more difficult to get a proposed charter adopted than it is to draft one.”

### **The Referendum Campaigns**

There are at least two campaigns for each consolidation referendum. One campaign must persuade the average voter that consolidation is in his or her best interests. The opposing campaign must convince the average voter that the proposed consolidation is contrary to his or her best interests and should be opposed in the referendum!

Examining the cases in our sample suggests that the referendum campaign process is not about outspending opponents. In fact, pro-consolidation forces grossly outspent their opposition in all of the unsuccessful consolidation cases. Instead, the key to a successful vote is the message of the campaign. The message needs to be honest and sincere. Figure 2 presents a respecified C3 model that incorporates the findings regarding the underlying rationales.

<<FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE>>

***The Pro-Consolidation Campaign.*** In the strong pro-merger campaign, the fundamental message of the campaign must be that the current structure of local government is unable to support the economic development vision promoted by the civic elites in the period building to the consolidation campaign. Swanson (forthcoming) observes that the civic elite’s rationale for consolidation in Jacksonville, FL included that it would “promote economic development with an improved, efficient, and effective government, as well as provide better governance and planning.” In addition, voters were led to expect a reduction of urban turbulence, a unified community, and municipal services with an equitable tax-burden. Reformers made much of “throwing the rascals out,” along with their party machine.

For consolidation campaigns to be successful, voters must be convinced that consolidation is required to restructure community *governance* for economic development. Fundamentally, the campaign is engaged in power deflation—*not before* the consolidation charter commission, but *after* the charter proposal is set and the referendum is defined. Our analyses of these cases suggest that *this* is the path to a successful consolidation referendum, as seen in Table 2.

<<TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>>

In the weak pro-merger campaign, the message is about efficiency and economy gains from eliminating duplicated structures, or it is about eliminating or diminishing metropolitan fiscal disparities. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that this actually occurs in consolidations. (Which is not to say that it does not produce efficiencies or economies. But there has been little empirical study to measure the efficiency and economy impacts of consolidation.) Moreover, Durning, Gillespie, and Campbell (forthcoming) report in their case analysis of Athens, GA that at least half of the major accomplishments found in the post-consolidation review of the merger pertained to economic development and long-term community development. In short, these sample cases suggest that this weak pro-merger campaign is most certainly doomed to fail. Bacot (forthcoming) emphasizes that the post-hoc analysis of the Lafayette, LA consolidation

highlights the economic development benefits, including “unified development and planning” and “unprecedented infrastructure improvements.” The economy and efficiency benefits are secondary at best.

The Athens, GA case serves as an excellent example of how campaigns matter. The reformers in Athens and Clarke County attempted consolidation in 1969, 1972, and 1982, before the successful attempt in 1990. This history suggests that the case would fall in the lower-right quadrant of Table 2 for the first three attempts, before moving to the lower-left quadrant in the successful 1990 attempt. Durning, Gillespie, and Campbell (ibid) observe that the conditions for the first three attempts were very similar. A crisis was not present, nor was power deflation or an accelerator event. All three campaigns had approximately the same level of involvement of civic elites in the pro- and opposition camps, the same charter provisions, and the same amount of public input. The pro-consolidation forces utilized efficiency arguments as the primary draw for citizens to vote for consolidation, which we consider a “weaker approach” than economic development arguments produce; and the opposition was not particularly strong (the weak opposition value in Table 2).

Durning, Gillespie, and Campbell (ibid) argue that the critical differences between the 1990 success and previous attempts are that in the 1990 attempt, the unification study commission was a response to citizen demands, that the process was successful in attracting citizens to consolidation discussions, that the process was compressed and kept citizen interest, and that the charter was written by citizens, not government officials. More importantly, we also note that the pro-consolidation reformers moved beyond their arguments about consolidation efficiencies to argue that a single government would be better able to attract new businesses (a strong campaign in Table 2).

We also find that overwhelming support of elected officials is essential; they must be an integral part of the pro-consolidation campaign. It is particularly helpful when the existing mayor is in support of consolidation and is involved with the pro-consolidation campaign. We found that in many of the cases where consolidation passed, such as Columbus, GA and Lafayette, LA, the charter commission members were very vocal about their support of consolidation. The Kansas City, KS case was an exception; consolidation passed without the support of all of the charter commission members. Initially it appeared that all of the charter commission members supported consolidation together. As the pro-consolidation campaign went on, the African-American member began to speak out against consolidation, but it was too little and too late in the process to bolster the opposition’s campaign.

***The Anti-consolidation Campaign.*** These cases suggest that successful opposition campaigns are strong, not because of money, but because they often have the support of a leading elected official. Successful opponents to consolidation can be former council members, mayors, members of the consolidation study commission, and of course, sheriffs. The key is that they often have the power and influence to mobilize grassroots opposition and mobilize disaffected groups. Opposition by a leading elected official, and especially a group of officials, can indicate that civic elites are divided in their views on consolidation. The minority community can provide the winning edge for consolidation when it mainly supports consolidation. Likewise, the minority community can just as easily provide the margin of defeat when key African-American leaders oppose consolidation.

The 1995 Wilmington, NC attempt is a combination of a weak pro-consolidation and a strong anti-consolidation campaign. The proponents of consolidation argued for consolidation based on efficiency arguments, rather than economic development arguments, a “weak

campaign.” The strong opposition to consolidation was spearheaded by many leading city elected officials.

A strong opposition campaign can even neutralize a strong economic development argument for consolidation, producing “even odds” for a consolidation success (Table 2). In the 1997 Kansas City, KS case a strong pro-consolidation campaign based on economic development was matched with a strong opposition campaign led by the old machine Democrats and county commissioners. In this case, however, the economic development message was reinforced by perceptions of a crisis climate (emphasized by the chamber of commerce).

On the other hand, the 1976 Tallahassee, FL case suggests that a strong campaign that meets strong opposition may not be able to prevail. The pro-consolidation campaign arguments touted benefits that included development of the 1990 comprehensive growth management plans, unified environmental and comprehensive planning functions, new jobs due to a more friendly business environment, government ethics, growth management, environmental protection, improved human services, and home rule. This strong economic development campaign message was met with a strong anti-consolidation campaign coalition that included the sheriff, county tax collector, the African-American community; corporate interests opposed to consolidation also funded the opposition campaign. The sheriff placed a paid political advertisement two days before the referendum to present data on the current benefits of his office and the future costs of his office under consolidation. The pro-consolidation reformers were not able to overcome this strong opposition.

Minority support or opposition can provide the necessary margin for victory or defeat. Emergence of key African-American leaders in the 1995 Augusta, GA case was key in the passage. Likewise, in the case of Kansas City, KS, several key African-Americans, primarily pastors of influential churches, supported consolidation. Minority media support or opposition can also play a critical role, but not ultimately sink consolidation (as was the case in Kansas City, KS case).

In sum, our analysis of the consolidation campaigns suggests that strong campaigns based on economic development messages are likely to prevail when the civic elites are united in their views and when they can craft a charter that does not create any “poison pills” that agitate and energize opponents so much that the opponents can mount a campaign against consolidation. The two key measures to minimize opposition campaign strength are insuring that the sheriff is either a supporter or remains neutral, and protecting minority representation. For consolidation success depends not on how much money the proponents can spend, but whether their message is strong (i.e., about economic development).

### **Discussion: Economic Development as the Catalyst**

By assessing twelve recent cases of consolidation proposals in light of the C<sup>3</sup> model, we believe we have identified the critical explanation of why some consolidations are successful and others fail. The common rationale underlying the successful cases in our sample is that the civic elites develop a vision for the economic development of the community—a vision larger than the city, encompassing the county as a whole. For civic elites, largely guided and funded by the local business community, the central and enduring issue is whether the community as a whole faces economic decline or economic growth. It does not, most often, require the economic conditions to be in crisis. Rather, the concern for these civic elites is whether the current government structure of multiple, competing jurisdictions is capable of supporting and nurturing this economic vision. The essential elements of a successful consolidation, then, are civic elites who are able to define the economic development vision for the community, determine that the

existing political structure is inadequate to supporting and implementing that vision, and then successfully convincing the average voter that consolidation is the solution to the economic development that will benefit the whole community, not just the elites.

This is not to ignore the efficiency effects of consolidation. Technical efficiency is achieved as a result of a combination of three factors. First, economies of scale can be achieved for select services that both the city and county provide, including combining benefit plans, vehicle maintenance, and select areas of administration. Second, technical efficiency is improved with more professional accountability structures, including a city-county manager with day-to-day administrative powers, and moving from a personnel system based on patronage to one based on merit, especially in “unreformed” counties. It also involves improving the transparency of the current budget process to identify opportunities to reallocate resources (positions and dollars) for more effective uses. And third, combining two local governments that serve roughly the same population can eliminate duplication and therefore produce a lower cost of government. Yet, reform arguments that emphasize the values of technical efficiency, where one government is seen as more efficient than two, will fail. They do not pass muster with voters in referenda. Others proponents of metropolitan consolidation construct their arguments around redistributive or equity arguments. These consolidation arguments also are likely to fail. Reformers who highlight the value of equity typically advocate consolidation so that a struggling city with an eroding tax base but high service levels can begin to tax suburban wealth. For consolidation to be a success in their eyes, the process must incorporate a relatively wealthier new territory into the central city’s tax base to improve the overall financial position of the central jurisdiction. This is a very challenging way for consolidation reformers to approach the issue, and they typically fail. Suburban cities included in the consolidation will typically oppose any merger for fear of tax increases (Stephens & Wikstrom 2000).

The reason for such failures lies in the logic of the Oates (1972) fiscal federalism model and Peterson’s (1995) functional perspective on politics. Oates asserts that the division of government responsibilities must respect the comparative advantage of each level of government. Local governments are better suited to address the developmental needs of their locality effectively and efficiently. The national government, and to a lesser extent state governments, are more suited to provide redistribution. This higher level of redistribution essentially transfers economic resources from those who have been successful in economic development to those who have been less successful.

Peterson (ibid) concurs with the Oates model, asserting that the purpose of municipal government is to provide developmental programs for the physical and social infrastructure necessary to facilitate economic growth. Developmental programs include the physical infrastructure of roads, mass transit, sanitation, public parks and other basic utilities and amenities, and the social infrastructure institutions that protect persons and property from unlawful activity, protect public health and educate the next generation. Local governments are most adept at making decisions related to economic development, and politicians and their constituents are more comfortable and more accepting of developmental politics than redistributive politics. Although local governments can provide developmental programs effectively, often giving rise to inequities across metropolitan areas, municipalities are not the appropriate level to counter these inequities.

This distinction is theoretically important because when local governments attempt to provide redistributive programs, they often fail; such programs require participation of a much broader region, an impossible task for most municipalities alone. One might then ask whether

successful consolidations achieve a broad enough region to involve themselves in redistributive policies. Perhaps they do. In essence, the consolidation marshals resources for economic development from a regional base. That is the whole point of the reformers. Whether such governments are willing and able to use the consolidated powers to mobilize resources for other efforts is beyond the scope of our data, but an interesting question.

Rusk (1995) is correct in arguing that larger local units can spread the costs of central services, but our analysis suggests that this is not a successful argument for unifying support for city-county consolidation. Instead, whatever redistribution occurs is likely to be a longer-term consequence of the consolidation process. There is an urgent need to study the consequences of consolidations, not just regarding whether the promises of reformers are delivered, but also as to the equity effects in the short and long runs. Such a study should use a rigorous comparative case study design to control for threats to internal validity and provide for generalizability to future city-county consolidations. The steady drumbeat for consolidations will not doubt continue.

### **Notes**

1. Contributors for individual cases include: Bert Swanson, Arnold Fleischmann, Jennifer Custer, Linda Johnson, Glen Sparrow, Hunter Bacot, Paul Coates, Alfred Ho, Rick Campbell, Dan Durning, William Gillespie, Gary Johnson, David Houston, Tony Nownes, Hank Savitch, and Ronald Vogel. In addition, Beth Honadle reports on the case of Branch/North Branch, MN, a consolidation of two cities.
2. We refer to all cases in the format of the city name. The full names are available from table 1.
3. For example, the most recent charter for Tallahassee County provided that the city's utility would continue to serve the same area under consolidation and would not be allowed to take over business from the previously unincorporated area which was serviced by another private utility company, Talquin Electric.

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**Table 1. City-County Consolidation Cases in Sample.**

<b>Consolidation Case</b>	<b>Successful Attempts</b>	<b>Unsuccessful Attempts</b>	<b>Continuing Attempts</b>
<b>Jacksonville/Duval County, FL (1967)</b>	X		
<b>Columbus/Muscogee, GA (1970)</b>	X		
<b>Tallahassee/Leon, FL (1971) (1973) (1976)</b>		X	X
<b>Sacramento/Sacramento County, CA (1974) (1990)</b>		X	
<b>Athens/Clarke County, GA (1972) (1982) (1990)</b>	X		
<b>Lafayette Parish/City of Lafayette, LA (1992)</b>	X		
<b>Des Moines/Polk County, IA (1994)</b>		X	X
<b>Augusta/Richmond County, GA (1971) (1974) (1976) (1988) (1995)</b>	X		
<b>Wilmington/New Hanover, NC (1927) (1973) (1987) (1995)</b>		X	X
<b>Knoxville/Knox County, TN(1996)</b>		X	
<b>Wyandotte County/KCK (1997)</b>	X		
<b>Louisville/Jefferson County, KY (1982) (1999)</b>	X		
<b>Total of 12 Cases (26 Attempts)</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>

<b>Table 2. Predicted Results for Combinations of Consolidation Campaigns.</b>		<b>Strength of Pro-consolidation campaign</b>	
		<b>Strong Arguments (Economic Development)</b>	<b>Weak Arguments (Efficiency, equity)</b>
<b>Strength of Anti-Consolidation Campaign</b>	<b>Strong opposition</b>	Even Odds	Fail
	<b>Weak opposition</b>	Pass	Fail

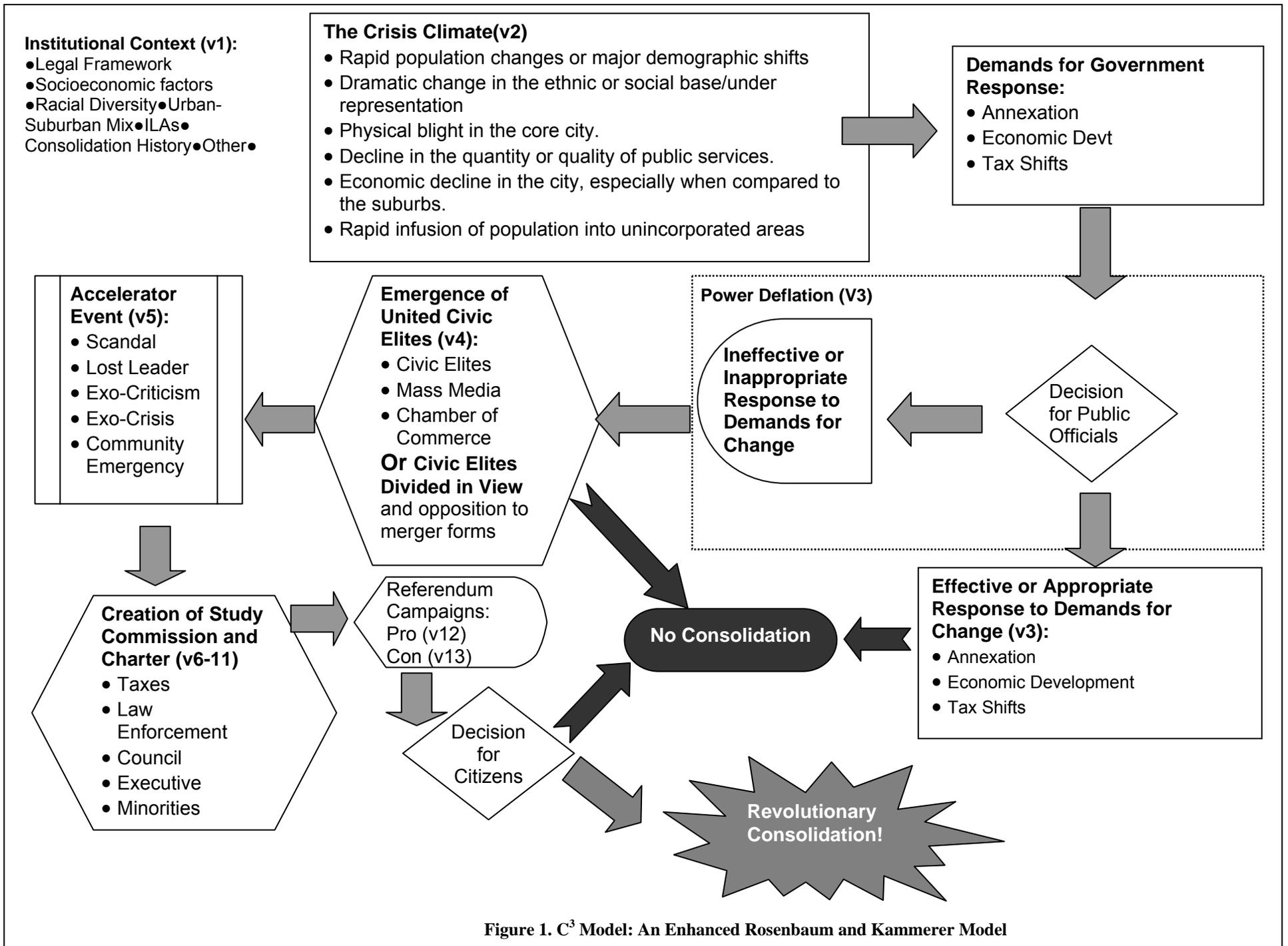


Figure 1. C<sup>3</sup> Model: An Enhanced Rosenbaum and Kammerer Model

**Institutional Context (v1):**

- Enabling Legal Framework & Supportive State Delegation
- Socioeconomic Factors of “Economic Decline”
- Consolidation History with “Lessons”

**Emergence of United Civic Elites with Economic Development Vision for Community (v2):**

**Creation of Study Commission and Charter for Consolidation (v3-8)**

- Taxes (v3)
- Law Enforcement (v4)
- Council (v5)
- Executive (v6)
- Minorities (v7)
- Minor towns (v8)

**Or...(v2)**

**Civic Elites Divided in View**

- **Opposition to merger forms**
- **Old Guard protects power**

**Strong Pro-Merger Referendum Campaign (v9):**

**Create Power Deflation**

- + **Current structure unable to support economic development vision for the community;**
- + **Consolidation is required to restructure community governance.**
- + **Professional organization**
- + **Substantial funding**

**Anti-Merger Referendum Campaign (v10):**

- Disenfranchised Sheriff
- No Efficiencies or Economies
- New Urban-rural inequities
- Substantial Funding
- Professional Organization

**Weak Pro-Merger Referendum Campaign (v9):**

- + **Efficiency**
- + **Economy**
- + **Equity-Fiscal Disparities**

**No Consolidation**

**Evolutionary Consolidation!**

**Figure 2. Revised C<sup>3</sup> Model: From Economic Development to Constitutional Politics**