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The Policy-Maps of Urban Decision Makers: Attitudes Toward Long-Range Planning

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Concern over the need to improve urban policy making has long been evident among scholars and observers of the urban scene. In general, such concern has arisen in response to the "syndrome" of concurrent policy problems often referred to as the "urban crisis:" growing central city-suburb disparities, rising crime and poverty, racial tensions, inadequate public service levels, and so on. Two related solutions which have often been espoused to help reduce the impact of such problems are more extensive urban planning and the reorganization of urban governments to facilitate comprehensive metropolitan policymaking. While progress toward both these latter goals is often assumed, most observers of urban governments are cautious regarding their fulfillment.

A number of studies have concluded that the attitudes and values of elected urban officials are a principal constraint limiting the development of policy strategies. Sayre and Kaufman found politicians to be a major obstacle to systematic planning in New York City. Similarly, Eulau and Eyestone argue that it is the commitment of city councilmen to the principle of city development, rather than objective factors, which determines the actual planning efforts and policy development of cities. Finally, Dror argues that the necessity of urban planning is not currently a feature of the values of politicians, just as the qualifications to plan successfully are rare among politicians.

Despite the existence of these isolated pieces of evidence, there exists no systematic analysis of the attitudes of elected urban officials toward the planning enterprise. Previous research has reported on the attitudes of professional planners, but little work has examined the planning attitudes of elected officials. Only Jennings and Getter and Elliot have provided brief analyses of such attitudes. Yet, neither of these studies provides much of a characterization of public officials' predilections toward planning. Both studies posed only a limited range of questions for their respondents. In fact, Getter and Elliot had only one planning attitude question in their study: whether respondents agreed there was a need for formal professional planning to guide the economic development of their jurisdiction. As discussed below, a number of more subtle issues are also important.

Since it is elected officials who must ratify the proposals of professional planners, in effect determining what values will be satisfied in the process, this paucity of research appears egregious. The purpose of this
paper is to offer some further evidence towards the filling of this void. We will report the attitudes of a sample of such elected officials towards a variety of aspects of long-range policy planning. We will also examine a variety of city and social background indicators which might be expected to constitute the correlates of attitudes toward long-range planning.

In effect, this research explores what Eulau and Eyestone11 have termed the “policy maps” of city officials. Such policy maps are constituted by the “predilections, preferences, orientations, and expectations” of policy makers. Our exploration of these mental maps is focused explicitly on officials’ general orientation toward policy planning and alternative institutional mechanisms often associated with such planning. While much current research seeks to gain insights into urban policy-making by examining current outputs from the system, this study addresses attitudes toward planning for the future, toward policy that has yet to be initiated. Our focus, then, is directly relevant to the principal concerns of modern urban planning as identified by Fagin.12

DATA COLLECTION

In order to provide some empirical evidence on these various aspects of policy maker attitudes, we administered a original survey instrument to a sample of mayors and city councilmen. We elected to study the universe of all such elected officials from a single geographically defined area. Not only did this strategy help minimize the costs and administrative problems associated with such a survey, but it also had useful substantive benefits, as well. Principally, our approach helped ensure that there would be some set of common policy problems for all our respondent’s cities and that our set of represented cities would span a broad range of sizes and types. Consonant with these intentions we chose as our study area Harris County, Texas.

The county’s major city is Houston, the fifth largest city in the country. Houston, like most large cities, is ringed by small satellite communities which have incorporated to maintain their separate identities. Consequently, Harris County provides an interesting and wide-ranging sample of cities and city governments for analysis.

Harris County may be termed a “polycentric political system.”13 With a population of nearly two million people, the county contains thirty-two incorporated municipalities. The largest of these cities are Houston with 1,400,000 residents; Pasadena with approximately 100,000; and Baytown with 45,000. The remaining 29 cities vary in population to a low of approximately 600 residents in Morgan’s Point. Given this diversity of community sizes and types, Harris County appears to offer a microcosm of the nationwide universe of metropolitan elected officials.

This set of cities provided us with a universe of 192 mayors and city councilmen. Given the wide range of cities which it represents, our sample should capture a wide variation in social backgrounds, levels of profes-
sionalism, and exposure to policy problems among our sample. This variability should facilitate the investigation of the importance of various likely independent influences on the planning priorities of such officials.

The actual instrument employed in the study was a mail questionnaire sent to our entire universe of mayors and councilmen in the Fall of 1975. In order to help ensure an adequate response rate, a variety of strategies were followed as prescribed in the survey research literature. Both the questionnaire and an introductory letter which preceded it were printed on university stationery and identified with a legitimate scholarly research enterprise. The questionnaire itself was kept as short as possible and a variety of opinions were elicited as to the satisfactoriness of the individual items before it was administered. Stamped return envelopes were included with the questionnaire and two mailings were employed to prod tardy respondents.

The resultant return was 58 percent of the total sample. While not extraordinarily high, this figure does reach the threshold of a "good" return rate as evaluated by Babbie. This return rate is virtually identical to that reported by Getter and Elliot, as well. Given the exploratory nature of this project, our response rate was deemed suitable. Also, examination of the distribution of our actual respondents across cities, city size, and various respondent background characteristics did not suggest any obvious biases in the sample.

The presentation of the results of our analysis will be as follows. First, we will discuss the responses of the entire sample to a variety of categories of questions regarding policy planning. This portion of the analysis yields a useful overall characterization of the planning attitudes of such officials. Second, we will examine the extent to which individuals' attitudes toward different aspects of planning are associated with their various background characteristics or with the demographic characteristics of their cities. Having described general planning attitudes in our first section, this second section will allow us to explore the reasons why some officials are more amenable to policy planning than are others. If one is concerned—as Dror suggests we should be—with integrating the planning imperative into the political culture of elected officials—then we need to ask the question: Why do some elected officials see planning as an important and efficacious governmental exercise while others do not?

The Parameters of Officials' Attitudes Toward Planning

Our data for this portion of the research fall into two sections. One contains a variety of questions dealing with very general attitudes toward policy planning. The second offers responses to a number of questions on appropriate institutional responsibilities for planning and on the perceived necessity of new institutional structures in urban planning and policy making. We will report the results of these two sections sequentially.
TABLE 1

*Attitudes Toward The Scope Of Planning*

(Percentages of respondents *agreeing* that individual policy areas require long-range planning in their respective communities)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Area</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road and Drainage</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water and Sewer</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police or Protective Services</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks and Recreation Areas</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidence*</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subdivision Planning</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire and Ambulance Service</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoning</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Growth</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Administration</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Growth or Decline</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollution Control</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other City Services</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average number of affirmative responses per elected official — 5.8.
Modal number of affirmative responses — 4.

*For some details on the subsidence issue, see footnote 2.*

**General Attitudes Toward Long-Range Planning**

Initially, some of our questions elicited opinions regarding the general necessity of long-range planning and the support for such activity by the community. When asked whether planning for the future was a necessary role for government, the overwhelming majority of our officials responded affirmatively. Ninety-five percent agreed with this position, and 63 percent expressed "strong" agreement with it. Also, large percentages of our respondents felt that both the public at large in their communities and other elected officials were concerned with long-range governmental planning. The affirmative responses to these two questions represented 80 percent and 87 percent of the sample, respectively. These results suggest considerable concern on the part of these officials with planning. Yet, these replies may be influenced by the "social desirability" of affirmative responses. Of more importance, they tell us little about the specific planning priorities of these officials. Other questions allow us to explore the latter issues in more detail.

The issue of the efficacy of planning is touched upon by another question wherein we asked whether *current* policy problems could have been bet-
ter dealt with by means of better prior planning. While three-fourths of the officials agreed with this proposition, a healthy 20 percent disagreed and 5 percent were undecided. Furthermore, when asked whether elected public officials had the necessary expertise to engage in long-range planning, the sample was virtually evenly split. Forty-five percent agreed and 49 percent disagreed, with nearly identical subgroups taking the strongly agree or strongly disagree options. The results on the two above questions cast some doubt on the usefulness of very general responses toward planning as initially presented. These last results indicate some significant uncertainty in the minds of public officials regarding both the efficacy of planning and the ability of individuals like themselves to effect it successfully.

Another important dimension concerns the extensiveness with which long-range planning should be employed and the kinds of policy problems at which it should be directed. In order to probe these issues, we posed for our respondents a list of thirteen policy areas and asked which of these required long-range planning for their community. The list of policy areas is reproduced in Table 1, along with the percentage of respondents that agreed their cities required long-range planning in each area.

The pattern of responses to this list is highly enlightening. We might consider first those items which received at least a majority of affirmative responses from our sample. Surprisingly, only four items meet this minimal criterion. Those items and their percentages of affirmative replies are: Roads and Drainage—74 percent, Water and Sewer—70 percent, Police—51 percent, and Parks—50 percent. Thus, the only policy areas which received widespread support were literally basic service areas. None of the items on our list which address the academically conceived major problems of urban areas received a majority of positive replies. In fact, examination of the results for all the items indicated that the “major” issues usually received the lowest support: pollution—28 percent, population changes—31 percent, and subsidence—45 percent. The subsidence issue alone received fairly high support in this group, and this fact may be best accounted for by the unusually high publicity and salience associated with this issue in the area at the time of our survey.18

If we review the results presented so far, one derives a useful picture of the general policy planning attitudes of such officials. They offer high levels of support for planning when it is presented as a very generalized prerogative of government. Yet, when one scratches the attitudinal surface, a different posture is indicated. Our respondents were ambivalent about the general efficacy of planning and of their own ability to engage in planning successfully. These latter questions could have been viewed by our officials as requiring “socially desirable” responses, as well. That they did not respond in such a fashion may underscore the depth of their misgivings about the planning enterprise.
When one explores the actual planning priorities of officials, there is even less accord than with their initial responses about its general desirability. Over a large number of specific issues, our sample tended to be very conservative in choosing problem areas which they estimated to require long-range planning. Furthermore, those issue areas which did not receive general support in these terms could be called the most mundane and commonplace of urban governmental concerns. They are literally the basic priorities of urban government. Those other policy areas which are generally associated with the syndrome of modern urban problems were generally seen by our respondents as not requiring long-range planning.

The preceding results and comments provide an interesting beginning, but to round out our description of the policy planning views of these officials we must turn to our results regarding different institutional mechanisms.

**Attitudes Toward Institutional Responsibilities for Urban Planning**

A number of commentators on urban governance have argued the necessity of new institutional forms to deal more effectively with the variety of policy problems in the modern urban setting. Given the widespread acceptance of such views—at least among a large number of scholars—it should be useful to examine the attitudes of urban officials themselves toward similar issues. Our survey contained a number of questions the responses to which allow us to characterize the views of our sample regarding institutional responsibilities.

Initially, we asked whether these officials thought their present form of city government was capable of meeting the future needs of its citizenry. Ninety percent replied affirmatively, with 50 percent taking a "strongly agree" stance. This question alone indicates that our sample of officials is not particularly amendable to institutional tinkering to meet future needs. However, we can explore their views further by means of some additional questions.

Two questions probed the specific alternatives of regional government and regional planning. When asked whether regional government might offer the best solution to area problems 62 percent took a negative stance. Similarly 59 percent of the sample did not think that the long-range needs of their specific community would be best met by regional planning either. Again, these results suggest intransigence toward relatively novel institutional forms. It is, however, notable that 26 percent and 28 percent of the sample replied affirmatively to these respective questions. At least a significant portion of these officials recognize the potentialities of regional solutions. This fact represents somewhat less resistance to change than does the near unanimous response to our very first question under this heading.

There is another perspective from which we can approach the issue of institutional responsibilities for policy—that is in terms of existing rather
than hypothetical institutional forms. First, we asked what level of government (local, county, regional, state, federal) should have the responsibility for *initiating* policy solutions for urban problems. Not surprisingly, perhaps, 85 percent of our sample felt this to be the prerogative of local governments. No other single level received more than 3 percent of the responses, and only 7 percent recognized that several governmental levels might appropriately initiate policy solutions.

The logical second half of this perspective on institutional responsibility is provided by responses to the question: which among these same levels of government should be responsible for *financing* these urban policy solutions. On this point, replies for only local financing fell to 61 percent, still a significant majority. However, 6 percent voted for federal financing and 29 percent for responsibility shared among two or more levels. (No other single alternative received as much as 3 percent of the responses.)

To summarize this last section of the findings we might want to term our respondents as generally parochial and localist in their orientations toward institutional responsibilities. On the average, they are reticent to accept institutional changes which would diminish their own responsibilities. They also appear somewhat unsophisticated in their failure to recognize the considerable influence which various levels of government already have on their own local policy choices. Finally, there is the interesting duality that they wish to control the selection among policy alternatives but are willing to accept outside financial assistance to implement those selections.

We can only speculate at this point as to the various sources of this overall set of orientations on the part of our decision-makers. Certainly, many features of our description accord with other views of urban official attitudes in this realm, as cited in our introduction. In effect, our results provide empirical support for the expectations of many other scholars—and professional planners—on this issue. The most important aspect of our results, however, is likely to be their implications for the future of serious governmental planning in urban areas. If political leadership is ambivalent or even antithetical to widespread long-range planning, our expectations should be guarded about serious implementation along these lines.

At the same time that our general picture of official support for long-range planning must be a gloomy one, there are portions of our preceding results which provide some basis for optimism. After all, some of the respondents did feel their own expertise was limited in this area, that planning was needed for major policy problems, that regional or other alternative solutions were required to deal with the problems facing their areas. In short, there was variation in the responses to at least some of the questions and not inconsiderable “minority” positions on some of them. Because such variation exists, we are in a position to ask why some elected officials are more amenable to planning than are others. For practical,
political, and theoretical reasons one might wish to know what kinds of elected officials are more likely to be supportive of this enterprise. We turn to this issue in the next section.

THE CORRELATES OF SUPPORT FOR LONG-RANGE PLANNING

In this section we examine the extent to which planning attitudes are associated with various background characteristics of elected officials and demographic characteristics of their cities. Our concern is with isolating those characteristics which distinguish officials who actively support long-range planning from those who do not. We have found in previous literature no hypotheses to guide our choice of variables in this part of the exercise. Certainly, our own analysis of this issue will have to be seen as a preliminary effort. As discussed in the introduction of this paper, it is nonetheless important to raise this question and to explore some likely answers to it.

For the purposes of this analysis we have chosen to examine the responses to three of the planning questions discussed in the previous section. These three were chosen for further analysis because of their substantive prominence and because there was a fairly wide variation in the responses to each of them.

One measures is an index of the perceived scope of planning needs for the community of each respondent. This index is simply the sum of the number of "yes" responses an official gave to the list of 13 policy areas shown in Table 1. Officials with high scores on this index are those respondents who felt their cities required long-range planning in a large number of these areas.

The second question examined here asked whether public officials have the requisite expertise to engage in long-range planning. The reader will recall that the respondents were virtually evenly split in terms of positive and negative replies to this question.

The last question of interest in this section is that which asked whether local community needs would be best met by regional planning. While the majority gave negative replies on this point, a significant minority took some affirmative stand.

In order to isolate the correlates of attitudes on these planning questions, we examined cross-tabulations of these questions with various background variables. One set of these variables was related to the educational and professional background of the respondents. Among these were their years of formal education, type of education or degree where applicable, and type of profession. Two other variables were available which tap generational differences: age of the respondent and years of residence in the local community. Another pair of variables focuses on experience in public office and attention to professional concerns related to public office. One of these is simply the number of years in public office. The other is an index of the extent to which individuals read newspapers and periodicals
devoted to political news, local and area policy problems, and professional perspectives on such problems. For each respondent, the index value is a number which represents how many such periodicals he reported reading regularly from a list of 13 possible ones. Finally, we also examined the variation in planning attitudes of officials from cities of different population sizes. Not only are larger cities likely to have more complex policy problems, but their citizens are also likely to elect more professionalized public officials.

In order to provide a summary of our findings in this section, we present in Table 2 measures of association between these planning attitudes and background variables. These correlations indicate the extent to which there is covariation or concordance between the individual attitude and background variables. Theoretically, these correlations could range from $+1.00$ to $-1.00$—indicating perfect concordance and perfect discordance. Zero correlations denote an absence of any concordance in the orderings on the two variables.

Examination of the results in Table 2 provides a somewhat surprising general conclusion. None of the background variables are even moderately associated with our three planning attitude indicators. In fact, most of the associations are near zero—indicating that the variables are virtually independent. That is, variation within our sample on such traits as age, level of education, years in office, size of city represented, and so on are not reflective of differing attitudes toward long-range planning.

It is further notable that only three of the correlations in the table reach a level of acceptable standard of statistical significance—indicating that the observed bivariate distributions are unlikely to have resulted from chance. For these three relationships, the correlations indicate that officials who read more have only a slight tendency to perceive more policy areas with planning needs, and officials who have been in office longer and those who have been in the community longer have a slightly greater tendency to believe that public officials do have the expertise for planning.

In order to confirm the conclusions based on Table 2, we also examined similar cross-tabulations of all our other measures of planning attitudes and the set of background variables. We also examined differences in planning attitudes across categories of educational background and current profession. For none of these background variables was there a significant discernable relationship—either positive or negative—with any of our planning attitude indices. In short, we cannot attribute attitudes in this area to any of these characteristics of our sample of officials.

**CONCLUSION**

It would appear that our results support the expectations of several scholars, as cited in the introduction, that politicians tend to be hostile to, or distrustful of, long-range planning and its associated ramifications. We find little evidence, then, for the more optimistic view of support for plan-
ning which one could infer from Jennings and Getter and Elliot. 22

To summarize, we have found our sample of elected officials to be conservative in their estimates of the need for planning in their cities, uncertain as to the efficacy of the planning enterprise, and inimical to those institutional mechanisms associated with area wide metropolitan planning. Notably, the above generalizations stand in spite of the high percentages of the sample which approved of long-range planning when it was posed in very general terms.

Our results on the correlates of planning attitudes suggest that for either theoretical or practical purposes it may be difficult to predict the responses of individual public officials to planning initiatives. The inability to so predict poses a great obstacle for professional planners who might wish to anticipate reactions to their work and for scholars who might wish to understand why cities adopt or do not adopt systematic planning. The implication is, of course, that more refined analyses will be necessary to uncover the determinants of support for long-range planning.

It is important to qualify our findings with the observation that our sample is drawn from a single state and a single region within that state. Thus, influences arising from such factors as a homogenous state political culture might affect our results. Ideally, our findings should be tested for other samples of urban politicians drawn from different locales. Yet, it is also important to reiterate that the present results are derived from a set of cities which is itself widely varying—with small semi-rural towns, suburban bedroom communities, upper class enclave cities, and large metropolitan centers. The sample of city councilman is itself more widely varying, then, and likely more “representative” of other locales than it might appear at first glance.

Despite the preceding qualifications, the implications of our results appear to be far-reaching in terms of the context within which long-range planning is usually advocated. For those who see systematic long-range planning as a necessary or, at least, important tool for dealing with major urban problems—our results offer little optimism for the political acceptance of this activity. Similarly, for those concerned with the need for urban as opposed to city planning, our results offer little room for optimism here either. Eulau and Eyestone 23 suggested that “‘Policy-makers’ willingness to set their city on a course of development depends on the content of their policy maps.” If such is the case, our results suggest that city government activities in the greater Houston area can be expected to remain heavily oriented toward basic public services, exhibit little concern with long-range policy problems or problem implications, and eschew coordination across individual cities. Results such as those presented in this paper should help, then, in explaining what one may expect in the form of urban policy yet to be formulated, a goal which is equally important to that of explaining the character of current outputs.
TABLE 2

Correlations of Selected Planning Attitudes With Social And City Background Characteristics\textsuperscript{a}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Dimension</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of Residence</th>
<th>Years in Office</th>
<th>Readership Index</th>
<th>City Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Index of Scope of Planning needs</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.17\textsuperscript{*}</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Officials have the expertise to plan?</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.20\textsuperscript{*}</td>
<td>-.20\textsuperscript{*}</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local needs will be met by Regional Planning?</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a}Figures in the table are Kendall's tau c correlations—measures of association for ordinal variables paired in tables with unequal numbers of rows and columns.

*Indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 level.
Footnotes


11 Eulau and Eyestone, “Policy Maps of City Councils and Policy Outcomes . . . .”


16 Getter and Elliot, “Receptivity of Local Elites Toward Planning,” p. 89.

17 Unlike the order of presentation of these results in the paper, their order in the questionnaire was mixed to minimize the possibility of inducing a response set.

18 Subsidence refers to the slow but relentless sinking of coastal land on Galveston Bay—adjacent to Houston and directly affecting several smaller communities. The subsidence problems results from extensive pumping of underground water for municipal and industrial usage in this coastal area. It is notable that despite the high public salience of this issue at the time of our survey, it is a policy problem that directly affects only a minority of the cities represented in our sample.

19 For a review of the various ways by which state and federal governments constrain local planning and policy efforts, see David C. Ranney, *Planning and Politics in the Metropolis* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969), pp. 61-84.


21 The results reported in Table 2 are strictly appropriate for ordinal measurement, the ordinal scale for most of our attitudinal data. However, many of our independent variables—and all of those in Table 2—are measured at the interval level. For the purpose of presentation in that table, our interval data were collapsed into suitable categories and treated as ordinal. In other analyses unreported here we treated all the variables as interval and computed Pearsonian correlations among all the attitudinal and background variables. No differences of any note from those reported in Table 2 or elsewhere in the paper were discovered.

22 M. Kent Jennings, “Planning and Community Elites in Two Cities,” and Russell W. Getter and Nick Elliot, “Receptivity of Local Elites Toward Planning.”