

SUPPORT FOR MUNICIPAL DETACHMENT

Evidence from a Recent Survey of Los Angeles Voters

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The authors investigate the relationship between individual attributes and support for municipal detachment by analyzing a recent survey of Los Angeles voters. In this survey, San Fernando Valley residents were asked whether they favored detachment from Los Angeles and reorganization as a separate city. Multinomial logit regression results indicate that support for detachment is influenced by demographic characteristics, community attachment, and political ideology. However, opinions of detachment are unrelated to an individual's economic circumstances.

In this article, we examine the factors that bolster individual support for the revision of municipal boundaries. We analyze the results of a recent survey of Los Angeles voters regarding the possible detachment of the San Fernando Valley. We contribute to the existing literature on municipal boundary formation by being the first to examine individual-level data.

In a 1998 poll, San Fernando Valley voters were asked whether they favor detachment from Los Angeles and reorganization as a separate city. They were also asked numerous questions concerning their own circumstances. Although respondents were not asked for their income levels, we matched their street addresses to 1993 census tract data on median household income. In addition, the respondents' political party affiliation and recent voting history were obtained from the Registrar of Voters. This information is used to

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test whether voter support for detachment is influenced by economic position, community ties, and political ideology.

Our results indicate that voters give more weight to political and community considerations than to economic ones when forming their opinions of detachment. Assessments of detachment are closely tied to an individual's race, political party, voting frequency, length of residence, and proximity to city government. Yet, opinions of secession are unrelated to neighborhood income, home ownership, and employment status.

THE DETACHMENT PROCESS

The idea of detaching the San Fernando Valley's 1.3 million residents from Los Angeles (with 3.8 million residents) is not new. A 1977 effort was stymied when the California State Legislature gave city councils the power to veto detachment (Detwiler 1996). The issue surfaced again in 1997. State Senator Paula Boland, an original supporter of San Fernando Valley detachment, launched legislation to eliminate the city council veto. That legislation failed to pass, but pressures mounted and a similar bill passed both the California Assembly and Senate one year later.

The new legislation requires a double majority in support of secession—voters in both the area detaching and the city as a whole must favor detachment. This is not seen as an insurmountable hurdle because Valley residents vote disproportionately to their numbers. In Los Angeles, Valley residents comprise one-third of the population but roughly 45% of those who vote. Support for detachment is also expected from other communities seeking secession.

In the wake of this legislative success, a grassroots organization called Valley VOTE (Valley Voters Organized Toward Empowerment) was created and a petition drive initiated. By March 1999, Valley VOTE had collected the 132,000 signatures needed (25% of all registered voters) to begin the detachment process.

State law requires the Los Angeles County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to study the fiscal implications of Valley secession. In an unprecedented move, the state legislature allocated nearly \$1 million to fund the study. If LAFCO finds the Valley has sufficient resources to become a self-sustaining city and that its separation will not financially affect the rest of Los Angeles, then Valley cityhood will be put to a popular vote.

ISSUES SURROUNDING DETACHMENT

Proponents of detachment emphasize the advantages of local control and indicate how large Los Angeles is relative to other cities. With a population larger than 25 states, it has only one local government. Proponents of detachment cite research that suggests economies of scale cannot justify cities much larger than 200,000 residents.¹ They also point to evidence that large city size is associated with reduced citizen participation, increased monitoring costs, and special-interest influence and rent seeking.²

Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan is one of the few outspoken opponents of detachment. Although he has publicly stated that cities of 400,000 residents are probably optimal, he thinks Los Angeles would suffer from a breakup. He has not stated specific concerns beyond the loss of power to lobby for federal funds.

Others who oppose detachment suggest that it allows Valley residents to flee from the problems of the inner city. State Senator Diane Watson called it “flight from the problems of the inner city” (Hefner 1997, N4). Per capita annual income in the San Fernando Valley (\$19,033) is higher than the rest of Los Angeles without the Valley (\$14,669). Thus, Valley residents are presumed to favor secession because it improves their relative position. Proponents of secession counter that the Valley has its own poor communities. They argue that breaking the city of Los Angeles into smaller jurisdictions will improve poor communities’ access to local government.

A debate has also arisen over the impact of detachment on the Valley’s minority community. Proponents of detachment say local control would bolster politically disenfranchised minority communities, whereas critics contend it would diminish the political power of minority residents. The Valley has a much larger Anglo population than Los Angeles without the Valley.³ Thus, minority groups would clearly lose representation if the Valley were to break away from the city. According to one critic, “Rather than empowering Valley blacks, secession might actually hurt them by cutting off relations with blacks on the other side of the hill” (Bustillo 1999, B1), and “Latinos in the Valley would go from an emerging majority to a clear minority” (Bustillo 1998, B1).

RESEARCH ON MUNICIPAL BOUNDARY FORMATION

Researchers have examined the institutional, economic, and political forces that shape municipal boundaries by using cross-sectional, city-level,

and county-level data. Most researchers have investigated annexation activity because detachments of any significant size are rare. Typically, factors thought to influence municipal boundaries, such as state laws on annexation, are regressed on dependent variables designed to capture annexation activity, such as changes in population or land area.

The evidence regarding the impact of state laws on annexation and detachment activity is mixed. Generally, state laws appear to influence annexation activity, but other factors are also significant.⁴

Austin (1999) examined the relative importance of economic and political factors in municipal annexation efforts. Although unable to show that short-run fiscal benefits motivate annexation, he did demonstrate the importance of other economic considerations. Communities with high levels of debt, many children to educate, or inadequate public infrastructure are less likely to be annexed.

Austin (1999) used race as a proxy for political alliances. He theorized that as minority populations increase in urban areas, white politicians use annexation to increase the number of white voters. He found support for his hypothesis that municipal annexations are motivated by attempts to maintain race-based political coalitions.⁵

Filer and Kenny (1980) tested the hypothesis that municipal consolidation is a vehicle for transferring wealth. They found a positive relationship between votes for consolidation and the percentage gain in median household income that would accompany consolidation. This suggests that voters support consolidation when they view it as wealth enhancing.

DATA AND REGRESSION ANALYSIS

The survey of San Fernando Valley voters used in this study was commissioned by the CIVIC (Citizens' Information Concerning a Valleywide Independent City) Foundation, a nonprofit organization established in 1997 to raise funds to investigate Valley cityhood. Arnold Steinberg, a professional pollster and political strategist, carried out the actual poll in February and March 1998.

Survey participants were randomly selected from lists of registered voters in the San Fernando Valley who had voted at least once since April 1993. In telephone interviews, respondents were asked whether they support detachment from the city of Los Angeles and reorganization as a separate city. Of the 1,205 individuals contacted, 59% answered yes, 29% said no, and 12% were unsure.

Although 1,205 individuals were contacted, only 1,068 observations are used in our empirical analysis. The excluded observations include individuals who have missing values for some of the explanatory variables and a few who were not residents of the San Fernando Valley.⁶

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the analysis sample. Most respondents are middle-aged, white, own their own home, and have lived in the San Fernando Valley for at least 20 years. Most respondents who work outside their homes are employed in the Valley. The median neighborhood income is typically \$46,920 per household. In addition, the average respondent is a Democrat, has voted four times in the past five years, and reads the *Los Angeles Times*.

We used a multinomial logit regression to identify factors that influence voters' preferences for cityhood.⁷ The dependent variable in the regression indicates whether a respondent is against, unsure, or in favor of cityhood for the San Fernando Valley. The explanatory variables include measures of political ideology, economic status, community ties, and demographics. The regression estimates the conditional probability that an individual will hold a particular opinion of cityhood, given the individual's characteristics.⁸

Table 2 presents the marginal effects of the regressors calculated at their mean values.⁹ Attention is given to the determinants of favoring or opposing cityhood. The determinants of being unsure are not discussed because they lack intuitive appeal.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Political party affiliation and race may influence the respondents' political ideology and thereby affect their assessments of detachment. Because Republicans advocate decentralized decision making and the devolution of power to local communities, they are expected to strongly favor detachment. The regression results show that Republicans are 15% more likely to support secession than Democrats and 10% more likely to support secession than Independents.

Examining race as a proxy for political alliances, the smaller the group in the Valley relative to its presence in the city, the stronger the opposition to detachment one would expect from its members. The regression results confirm this hypothesis and the importance of race in explaining opinions of detachment. Black respondents are 23% more likely to oppose cityhood than whites. Latinos are 7% more likely to oppose cityhood than whites. Asians and other nonwhites are also more likely to oppose secession, but these results are not statistically significant.

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics (in percentages)

Opinions of Valley cityhood	
In favor	58.7
Against	28.8
Unsure	12.5
Demographic and economic profile	
White	74.3
Latino	14.0
Other race	5.7
Asian	3.5
Black	2.4
Ages 18 to 39	27.5
Ages 40 to 59	39.1
Age 60 and older	33.3
Male	47.3
Mean neighborhood income	46.9
	(15.5)
Homeowner	72.9
Community ties	
0 to 9 years in Valley	16.3
10 to 19 years in Valley	21.7
20 or more years in Valley	62.0
Not employed outside home	37.7
Employed in Valley	34.5
Employed in Los Angeles	17.7
Employed elsewhere	10.1
Mean distance to civic center	21.2
	(5.5)
Mean voting frequency	4.1
	(2.9)
No children at home	71.9
Children in public school	18.3
Children in private school	9.8
Political party registration	
Democrat	52.3
Republican	33.9
Independent/other	13.8
Information sources	
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	45.6
<i>Daily News</i>	35.3
Both newspapers	10.8
Other newspapers	8.3

NOTE: The sample size is 1,068. Mean neighborhood household income for 1993 is in thousands of dollars. Statistics are in percentages unless stated otherwise. Standard deviation is in parentheses.

TABLE 2: Marginal Effects from the Multinomial Logit Analysis

	<i>In Favor</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
Republican	0.149* (0.042)	-0.127* (0.031)	-0.022*** (0.013)
Independent/other	0.053 (0.058)	-0.101** (0.042)	0.048* (0.017)
Black	-0.280** (0.115)	0.228* (0.082)	0.052 (0.035)
Latino	-0.081 (0.057)	0.072*** (0.040)	0.010 (0.017)
Asian	-0.048 (0.096)	0.071 (0.068)	-0.023 (0.029)
Other race	-0.117 (0.078)	0.054 (0.055)	0.064* (0.024)
Not employed	-0.044 (0.051)	0.001 (0.035)	0.043* (0.015)
Neighborhood income	0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.001** (0.000)
Homeowner	-0.001 (0.046)	-0.004 (0.032)	0.005 (0.014)
0 to 9 years in Valley	-0.028 (0.056)	-0.002 (0.039)	0.029*** (0.017)
10 to 19 years in Valley	-0.049 (0.048)	0.062*** (0.034)	-0.013 (0.014)
Employed in Los Angeles	-0.001 (0.052)	0.039 (0.037)	-0.038** (0.016)
Employed elsewhere	-0.048 (0.063)	0.062 (0.044)	-0.014 (0.019)
Distance to civic center	0.009* (0.004)	-0.007* (0.003)	-0.002** (0.001)
Voting frequency	-0.021* (0.008)	0.021* (0.006)	-0.001 (0.002)
No children	-0.049 (0.052)	0.055 (0.037)	-0.006 (0.016)
Private school	-0.085 (0.073)	0.063 (0.052)	0.022 (0.022)
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	-0.181* (0.042)	0.170* (0.033)	0.010 (0.013)
Both newspapers	-0.093 (0.065)	0.055 (0.046)	0.038*** (0.020)
Other newspapers	-0.021 (0.072)	0.025 (0.051)	-0.004 (0.022)

NOTES: The sample size is 1,068. The log likelihood is -920.4. Standard errors are in parentheses. The regression also included an intercept, age, and gender.

*, **, and *** indicate significance in a two-tailed test at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

ECONOMIC STATUS

Previous work suggests that detachment will be more attractive to individuals who see municipal reorganization as wealth enhancing or in their economic self-interest. Some groups in the Valley may benefit at the expense of others if the new city's funding differs from that of the current city government. For example, poor neighborhoods might expect to gain if the new city shifts spending toward neglected areas. Or wealthier individuals might be affected by changes in industrial and commercial property values.

Three measures of economic position are available from the Valley poll—employment status, neighborhood income, and home ownership. Surprisingly, the regression results indicate that none of these variables is a statistically significant determinant of detachment support.

COMMUNITY TIES

Respondents were asked how long they had lived in the Valley, whether they work in the Valley, their community of residence (which allows a calculation of the distance to Los Angeles City Hall), whether any of their children attend private schools, and whether they read the local newspaper. In addition, the respondents' recent voting history was obtained from the Registrar of Voters. This information was used to test whether community ties affect detachment preferences.

Long-time residents have the greatest investment in their communities and therefore the highest costs of relocation. If there is great dissatisfaction with city government, long-time Valley residents are expected to favor detachment more than relative newcomers who can relocate at less expense. The regression results offer some support for this hypothesis. Respondents who have lived in the Valley between 10 and 19 years are 6% more likely to oppose cityhood than respondents who have lived in the Valley for at least 20 years.

Individuals who live and work in the Valley may view it as a separate entity and therefore support cityhood more than residents who commute to jobs outside the Valley. However, job location is statistically insignificant in the equations that indicate detachment support or opposition.

The tremendous size of Los Angeles makes active participation in city government costly. Those who live farthest from the city's center may favor detachment because they feel disconnected from the city. To measure this, the regression includes an estimate of the driving distance from each respondent's named community to the civic center.¹⁰ The regression results indicate

that each additional mile further from the civic center increases the probability of favoring Valley cityhood by 0.9%.

The number of times each respondent voted between April 1993 and the survey date is used to proxy the respondent's political involvement and participation. Individuals who vote frequently may not feel a need for smaller, more localized city government because they are politically active under the current city government. Alternatively, persistent voting may indicate an interest in local government that predisposes individuals to favor greater local control through detachment. The regression results favor the first explanation. Each additional trip to the polls by a respondent reduces the probability of favoring secession by 2%.

Survey respondents were also asked if they have school-age children living at home and, if so, whether those children attend public or private schools. The presence of school-age children in the home may strengthen community ties and concern over local issues. Moreover, the enrollment of children into private schools may signal general dissatisfaction with public services. However, neither of these variables is statistically significant.

A final measure of community attachment is whether respondents read a local or national newspaper. Readers of the *Daily News* are arguably more interested in local events than those who choose to read the *Los Angeles Times* and may be more inclined to favor the establishment of a local political jurisdiction. As expected, individuals who read the nationally oriented *Los Angeles Times* are 18% less likely to support Valley cityhood than individuals who read the more locally oriented *Daily News*.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICS AND COMMUNITY TIES

The San Fernando Valley poll data suggest that political ideology and community ties are more important to opinion formation than the economic profile of an individual. Republicans are more likely to support secession than Independents and Democrats. Moreover, those who demonstrate interest in local issues by reading the local paper are more inclined to support detachment. Individuals who already participate in city government (as measured by their recent voting history) are less interested in revising municipal boundaries.

Concerns over racial and geographical isolation are major factors in forming opinions of municipal detachment. Minority groups, whose representation would fall if the San Fernando Valley were to separate from Los Angeles,

are less enthusiastic about detachment than whites, whose representation would rise. The distance of a respondent's community from the Los Angeles Civic Center provides another measure of isolation. Distance from the seat of city government has a strong positive impact on detachment support.

Voters appear unaware or unconcerned that detachment from Los Angeles could alter property values and the distribution of wealth in the Valley. There is no relationship between economic position and respondents' attitudes toward Valley cityhood. Support from rich and poor neighborhoods alike suggests the broad appeal of local control. Moreover, the importance of community ties to detachment preferences indicates that residents see community-level benefits in local government.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Duncombe and Yinger (1993).
2. See, for example, Nellor (1984); Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993); Martin and McKenzie (1997); and Svorny (1998).
3. In 1997, Los Angeles demographers estimated Valley residents to be 45.9% white, 41% Hispanic, and 3.7% black. In contrast, the city without the Valley was estimated to be 23.8% white, 48.2% Hispanic, and 16.3% black.
4. Austin (1999), Galloway and Landis (1986), and Wheeler (1965) examined the impact of state laws on annexations. Epple and Romer (1989) examined the affect of state laws on detachments.
5. Dye (1964) and Liner (1990) have examined the importance of race (as a measure of discrimination or social distance) to annexations with mixed results.
6. There are no significant differences between the characteristics of the omitted sample and the analysis sample.
7. The multinomial logit model is appropriate in this setting. Each respondent makes a single decision (regarding cityhood) among three unordered alternatives (yes, no, and uncertain). Furthermore, the data contain individual-specific characteristics instead of choice-specific attributes.
8. The predicted probabilities at the mean of the explanatory variables (27.4% against, 11.7% unsure, and 60.9% in favor) are close to the frequency of actual opinions.
9. The estimated coefficients of the explanatory variables in the multinomial logit model are not presented to conserve space. However, these results are available from the authors on request. Table 2 contains the marginal effects calculated at the means of the regressors along with their standard errors. See Greene (1993, 666-68) for a discussion of this regression technique.
10. To account for faster highway driving time, one highway mile was counted as one-half of a street mile in the calculation of distance to the civic center.

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