

## *A Federalist Explanation of Municipal Elections*

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This paper suggests that individual voting behavior in municipal elections is most closely associated with voter concern with municipal economic development and basic city services. Redistributive issues and race are, as such, irrelevant in local elections. Candidates for local office should, therefore, avoid such issues and associate themselves with economic growth potential and better provision of services. To test this fiscal federal assertion, a panel survey of registered voters in Houston, Texas, was conducted during the city's 1985 mayoral election. The findings support the assertion that municipal electoral politics are limited by the very policies with which municipal governments are charged.

### **Introduction**

Municipal elections traditionally have not produced a dialogue fraught with deep and dividing issues. To the contrary, municipal elections have won a place in American politics as among the least fertile arenas for the study of issue-oriented politics. In part, this characterization has led to a number of misleading generalizations about the meaning and relevance of urban politics for our understanding of political, specifically electoral, behavior.

The issue content of municipal elections is in fact highly structured and predictable. Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that the determinants of urban elections, including issue content, confirm a general theory of functional assignment within a federal system. Drawing from the works of Tiebout (1956), Oates (1972), Peterson (1981), Wirt (1985) and others (Mollenkopf 1983; Friedlander 1983; Elkin 1984), we outline a general theory of urban elections in a federal system. Our central thesis is that the inability of any individual city to control the movement of capital and labor limits the range of policy activities it can pursue. This constraint on the scope of municipal public policy has a significant and direct effect on urban politics; that is, as Lowi (1969) stated, policy determines politics.

Empirical implications of this explanation are developed and used to reanalyze findings in the case and empirical literature on urban electoral voting behavior. Finally, a direct test of these hypotheses is presented based on survey data collected regarding the 1985 Houston, Texas mayoral election. Given that the analysis involves a single election in one city, the evidence presented should be regarded as illustrative rather than conclusive.

## General Literature Review

Empirical analysts of American urban politics (Hamilton 1971; Wolfinger 1971; Hawley 1973; Wirt 1985; Ballfield and Wilson 1963; Caraley 1977) have failed to detect any significant and consistent degree of issue or policy orientation in the content of contested urban elections. Moreover, factors that are influential in state and national elections, such as political groups and parties, either are absent from local elections or simply impotent to influence electoral outcomes (cf. Banfield and Wilson 1963). Low voter participation in municipal elections often is cited as the strongest evidence for the absence of any significant issue orientation in these elections (Caraley 1977).

The obstacles to voting are not so pervasive as to prevent an issue of widespread concern from mobilizing urban voters and influencing the outcome of a specific election. Writing from a national perspective, a number of theorists (RePass 1971; Rabinowitz et al. 1982; Shapiro 1969) have suggested that issues can surface as a dominant force in electoral contests when certain conditions are met. First, there must be an issue that is of significant salience and relevance to the majority of the electorate. Second, this issue must significantly differentiate the electorate along a continuum of preferred policy action: the voter's preference must be directed at some action to be taken or not taken by government. Finally, voters must perceive, though not always correctly, an issue position for each candidate.

When these conditions are met, researchers have found significant evidence of issue-oriented voting behavior (Rabinowitz et al. 1982; Niemi and Bartels 1985). The extension of this conditional explanation of issue voting to the municipal context seems premature and empirically unwarranted. A review of the case literature on urban elections suggests that even when the issue content of urban electoral campaigns has supported issue voting, little empirical evidence can be found that voters respond to these issue-oriented appeals.

The Boston mayoral elections between 1968 and 1979 are excellent illustrations of this type of municipal election (cf. Holli and Jones 1982; Ferman 1985). During this twelve-year period, Boston was under both state and federal orders to integrate its public schools, an extremely unpopular policy among the white ethnic voters who comprised the majority of the city's electorate (Ferman 1985). Based on the strength and direction of public preferences on this issue, Louise Day Hicks, a member of the city's school board and a nationally recognized opponent of school integration, challenged incumbent Mayor Kevin White in 1968, 1971 and again in 1974, losing each election by increasingly larger margins.

While Hicks' mayoral campaigns emphasized her opposition to mandated school integration, White's avoided directly addressing it, preferring to emphasize how powerless he was to influence the court or school board. The issue of school integration did not provide mayoral candidate Hicks the same electoral advantage it had in her successful school board campaigns, even though the school district's

boundaries, and thus its electorate, are co-aligned with the city's. The same voters who between 1968 and 1979 supported Hicks' anti-integration candidacy for school board overwhelmingly rejected her mayoral candidacy. After all, her issue of choice (school integration) was not the functional responsibility of the city.

The Boston case is not idiosyncratic. The inability of salient and divisive public issues to influence mayoral elections recurs in the case literature. Levine's (1974) case studies of racially charged mayoral elections in Cleveland, Gary and Birmingham emphasize the inability of many salient issues -- civil rights, poverty and housing -- to achieve any significant measure of influence in these mayoral contests. According to Levine and other researchers (Bellush and David 1971; Lipsky 1970; Wilson 1969), "race was clearly the central issue" in many of these elections (Levine 1974, 49). This interpretation, however, confuses issue politics with group politics. Race is not an issue in urban elections. Rather, it is a group association that can and often does have an independent effect on the outcome of urban elections.

Racial politics is merely 'colorful group politics' and as such refers to the tendency for members of the same group to exhibit similar electoral behavior (Wolfinger and Field 1966). Without individual-level survey data, it is ecologically fallacious to assume that individuals with the same group associations share or individually possess any focused policy preferences that they attempt to communicate to candidates for public office. In fact, one major advantage of political group membership (Key 1964; Schattsneider 1948) is that individuals need not burden themselves with extensive information on issues. The endorsement of candidates for public office by political groups provides individual voters a reliable and inexpensive means of choosing candidates. The voter assumes that the party and/or group endorses candidates and issues that maximize the voter's preferences. In fact, there is empirical evidence that shows voters are unusually accurate in predicting candidate issue positions from party/group affiliations (Brady and Sniderman 1986).

An assumption associated with urban theories of group voting behavior (cf. Wolfinger and Field 1966) is that ethnic electoral competition centers on the distribution of municipally-produced goods and services. Each group and/or its leaders "bargain with politicians, trading their followers' votes for money, favors and jobs" (Wolfinger and Field 1966, 818). This explanation of urban elections, though not at variance with the role of issues in urban elections, is significantly different. Wanting more than less of the city's largess does not constitute an electoral issue. Moreover, citizens do not concern themselves with the manner in which these basic housekeeping functions are performed. Voter concern with city services instead centers on a basic evaluation of equity (do I get my fair share?) and efficiency (am I paying too much for too little?). On these questions there is unanimity of preference.

Economists (Tiebout 1956; Oates 1972) and other social scientists (Peterson 1981; Wirt 1985; Friedlander et al. 1977; Mollenkopf 1983; Elkin 1984) have maintained that cities are severely constrained in the scope of their policy activities by their inability to control the mobility of labor and capital. Unlike national governments, which through tariffs and regulations can protect their borders against the loss of labor and capital to competing nations, cities are unable to protect their communities from raids on their labor force and business and industrial bases. Consequently, the sources of the city's economic, social and political well-being are unsecured. Because of their comparatively small tax bases and because of the mobility of their citizenry, businesses, and industries, cities must pursue developmental policies that generate additional economic resources while avoiding redistributive policies that threaten the city with a loss of productive capital and labor.

Many value-oriented redistributive policies (welfare, housing, health, etc.) benefit dependent and non-productive persons (indigents) while drawing resources away from productive citizens without providing these individuals commensurate benefits. This creates a contentious and intractable political environment that is best avoided by local governments since it operates to encourage the in-migration of unproductive and dependent individuals while driving productive nondependent citizens to other communities where they can receive a more favorable ratio of benefits to taxes paid. Elkin provides the clearest statement of the city's position in a federal system and its policy consequences:

A fundamental result of this definition of the city's place in the national political economy is that the political life of cities has been substantially shaped by a concern with maintaining and stimulating economic vitality (Elkin 1984, 12).

A municipal bias against redistributive policies is not limited to those programs that shift wealth from haves to have-nots. Policies that address basic beliefs and values rather than monetary interests tend to produce redistributive policy effects that are potentially as harmful to a city's economic well-being as the most fiscally redistributive municipal welfare program.

Policies involving school integration, abortion, gay rights and sanctuary for illegal aliens have a non-monetary but redistributive quality. These issues normally take on an inelastic and sometimes zero-sum character, producing policy outcomes in which the opportunities for compromise are limited. By posing a constraint on the range of admissible policy choices, these issues reduce the probability that a stable policy solution can be obtained. Individuals are likely to fight more tenaciously over issues associated with value redistribution than they are the issues involving income redistribution, particularly when the latter involves costs that can be trivialized with a distributive taxing mechanism.

Addressing redistributive value issues within an urban setting may produce

a more harmful and less predictable effect on the city's economic health. Prolonged, divisive fights over social issues with inelastic/zero-sum solutions divert attention from more central concerns of economic development and urban housekeeping. Moreover, many of these issues cannot be resolved at the local level either due to intractable political debates or structural and legal limitations on the city's authority (e.g., regulation of immigration, civil rights, etc.). More importantly, these issues have the potential of destabilizing the city's electorate and undermining established political coalitions (Shefter 1977). Since the attainment of economic vitality in part depends on the maintenance of stable political coalitions, sudden and unpredictable change in the politics and policies of a city undermine the business and financial community's confidence in the city's ability to promote and maintain economic vigor.

The issue content of urban elections will reflect a city's predisposition toward developmental and housekeeping policies and its aversion to redistributive policies. This is not to suggest that urban voters lack salient preferences on redistributive issues, only that within the context of municipal elections voters will not draw upon such issues in choosing candidates for public office. The absence of significant issue content in urban elections is a function of the scope of urban public policy, rather than of any inherent disinterest in the policies of municipal governments.

Concern with economic development, and the provision of basic city services (police, fire, sanitation, etc.) structure the vote choice of urban voters. In fact, a great deal of a city's politics, according to Peterson, centers on the "politics of allocation." Central to the politics of allocation is the continuing, and potentially explosive, question of who gets what, where, and how much (Peterson 1981, 165). Consequently, the rhetoric of municipal candidates is heavily skewed toward debates over the allocation of basic municipal services. As noted earlier, the politics of allocation and its direct impact on municipal elections is limited to "a relatively small group of citizens from a particular ethnic group" (Peterson 1981, 182). This perhaps explains in part the misinterpretation of the "racial issue" in urban politics. What may appear to be politics of race is actually competition between politically relevant groups over the distribution of scarce city resources. In Levine's words, "the politics of a number of American cities have become polarized along racial lines, superimposing the issue of race upon almost every significant political issue" (1974, 37).

The politics of allocation often is defined in terms of the incumbent administration's job performance. Incumbent Mayor Michael Bilandic's defeat by Jane Byrne in the Chicago mayoral election of 1978 is largely (though not exclusively) attributed to inadequate snow removal, a basic city service. Other mayors, including New York City's Abraham Beame (1968-1975), similarly have suffered electoral defeats for poor job performances. The view that city mayors must 'pick up the garbage on time' in order to get reelected is not entirely untrue, only misinterpreted. Performance of basic city services is an essential element in

the maintenance of a city's economic health. An inability to perform those services can easily undermine a city's attractiveness to productive businesses and individuals. Ineffective and inefficient provision of services can be necessary and sufficient for the defeat of an incumbent mayor, even when other factors, such as economic development and candidate image, favor the incumbent's reelection.

### **Hypotheses and Methodology**

Our explanation of voting behavior in municipal elections has identified voter concerns with municipal economic development and basic city services as the main determinants of individual vote choice. Economic- or value-based redistributive issues, on the other hand, will not influence significantly the vote choice of an urban electorate. Moreover, race *per se* will not have any independent effect on vote choice. However, race may differentiate voters in terms of their evaluation of the incumbent's performance of basic city services -- a distinction that is reflective of group- rather than issue-oriented politics.

One other variable has been added to our empirical analysis: candidate image. Candidates spend an enormous amount of money placing their names, faces, voices and personalities before the electorate in order to win voter support. Research at the national level suggests that this effort is not unrewarded and merits attention in our empirical analysis.

The dominant methodology in urban voting studies is the case or comparative case study. Often lacking in these studies are individual-level data with which to test generalizations about the behavior of urban electorates. Moreover, the absence of information on individual voters results in ecologically fallacious generalizations about municipal voters. Another limitation of case studies, even those based on the analysis of individual-level data, is the absence of adequate controls. The study of a single election in a single community presents a severe limitation on the number of explanatory variables that can be studied. Many theoretically interesting and empirically important determinants of voting behavior are either immeasurable or absent in a single setting. Based on a review of the literature we identified three factors that are frequently cited as determinants of urban electoral outcomes, but that are not always accessible to measurement in the case literature. They include: (1) candidate name recognition, (2) incumbency advantage, and (3) campaign financing. In the election we have chosen for study the potential influence of these factors has been minimized, if not eliminated, by conditions specific to the unique election studied.

### **The Research Setting**

The 1985 Houston, Texas mayoral election is the setting for a test of our explanation of municipal elections. The election matched two-term incumbent Kathy Whitmire against former five-term Mayor Louie Welch (1964-1974).

Welch retired as Mayor in 1974 to become head of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, a position he held until announcing his mayoral candidacy in May, 1985. Welch's mayoral experience and both candidates' high name recognition (>90 percent) provide an adequate and natural control for the potential effects of incumbency advantage and name-recognition upon vote choice.

During Mayor Whitmire's second term (1983-1985), the city and state experienced a severe economic recession. Unemployment had risen to 7.5 percent and the price of oil, on which the city's economy was heavily dependent, dropped from \$30.00 to below \$20.00 per barrel. During the same period, the city's commercial downtown began to feel the conjoint effects of the slumping oil market and the city's lack of economic diversification. Vacancy rates in commercial buildings rose to 25 percent, and residential property values, which had risen almost 12 percent annually prior to 1983, began to drop.

In July, 1984 the city council approved, with Mayor Whitmire's strong support, a city ordinance that prohibited discrimination against homosexuals in the hiring of city employees. The Gay Political Caucus had been a highly visible supporter of the Mayor and key city council-members. Their political support, many believed, was one of the main reasons behind the Mayor and council's support for the anti-discrimination ordinance. After council adoption, opponents of the ordinance mobilized and obtained a sufficient number of petition signatures to force a referendum on the ordinance. The referendum, held January 19, 1985, was preceded by a lengthy and costly campaign. Initially, organized opposition to the city ordinance was limited to religious groups (i.e., Black Baptists and white evangelical ministers) and extreme rightwing organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. In December, 1984, however, the Houston Chamber of Commerce, led by its executive director, Louie Welch, announced its opposition. The Chamber's opposition to the ordinance shifted the focus of debate from a concern with morality and public health to a concern over the ordinance's impact on the city's image and economic recovery.

Referendum voters (31 percent of the electorate) supported repeal of the city's gay rights ordinance by the overwhelming margin of 80 to 20 percent. Moreover, the turnout rate -- highest in the city's history for a referendum -- emphasized voter interest in the issue. Shortly after the election, organizers of the repeal movement announced formation of a "Straight Slate" party that would support candidates opposed to the mayor and council-members who had supported the gay rights ordinance. The formation of this anti-gay slate further served to keep the issue of gay rights before the public between February and the November election.

Whitmire's initial reaction to the voters' rejection of the gay rights ordinance was to suggest that the voters did not understand the issue. Her campaign rhetoric changed dramatically by July, when she formally announced her bid for a third term. Referring to the voters' overwhelming rejection of the ordinance, the Mayor said, "what's important is that it's behind us, all of us at City Hall accept that

decision” (*Houston Post* 1985). In her announcement speech, the Mayor emphasized the need for concentrating on “expanding the city’s economic base and strengthening employment opportunities” (*Houston Chronicle* 1985). As expected, Whitmire’s reelection campaign was based on her past performance and her proven record to lead the city’s economic recovery. The gay rights issue was a non-issue for her.

Welch did not begin campaigning in person until September 1, three months after he had announced his candidacy, because of a prior commitment to teach at a West Texas college. While out of town, Welch’s campaign relied exclusively on television, radio and newspaper advertisements. The content of these messages was dominated by three themes: the city’s economic problems, gay rights, and the decline in basic city services, particularly police protection.

After Welch returned to the city, his campaign expanded its attack on the mayor’s support of the gay rights ordinance. Welch used the gay rights ordinance as a point of departure that, according to him, “certainly points up a philosophical difference in moral values” between the candidates (*Houston Post* 1985). Moreover, Welch proposed a number of policies to protect the public from the potential health threat posed by the “gay lifestyle”. Shortly before the election Welch proposed that health cards be issued to food service and other workers that come into direct contact with the public to certify that they were not AIDS carriers. Though Welch campaigned on a number of issues, including the city’s economy and public services, the city’s gay rights ordinance was one of the central issues on which he campaigned and provides an excellent opportunity to test the attractiveness of this issue to an urban electorate.

Total campaign spending and fund raising for both candidates was almost equal, neutralizing the effect campaign finances might have had on the election’s outcome. Both candidates raised and spent approximately \$1.6 million, with Welch raising and spending \$11,000 more than Whitmire. Finance reports filed in June and October indicated that equal amounts were raised, though not spent, by both candidates at these critical points in the campaign.

### **Data and Operationalizations**

To measure the perceptions and candidate preference of Houston voters throughout the mayoral campaign, three surveys of registered voters were conducted between May 1985 and the November election: May 6-13; August 17-24; and October 24-28. The May survey consisted of 401 randomly selected registered voters, 300 of whom were reinterviewed in August and again in October. To minimize the potential bias associated with interviewing the same persons over a short period of time, additional random samples of 400 registered voters were interviewed in August and October, respectively. These respondents were not reinterviewed, and thus were excluded from the panel. A comparison of the two groups was made to test for the representativeness of our panel and potential



reinterview bias. Due to mortality rates (e.g., individuals moving from their previous residences) and constraints on our time in the field (four to seven days), only a panel of 186 persons could be interviewed in each of the three surveys. However, a comparison of survey responses and demographics for nonpanelists and panelists shows that the panelists are representative of the population of voters participating in the 1985 mayoral election.

In each survey respondents were asked identical questions concerning their issue preferences, candidate evaluations and candidate preferences. Some differences in question wording, particularly between the May and subsequent surveys, was needed in order to reflect campaign events that occurred between the surveys (e. g., announcement of Welch's candidacy). Measures of four independent variables were constructed from survey responses. With the exception of the respondent's position on the repeal of the gay rights ordinance, repeated measures for each independent variable were obtained from the same respondents in May, August and October, which allows us to examine how change in the level of these measures affects the structure of our model of urban voting behavior. Only in the May survey were panelists asked what their position was on the January, 1985 gay rights referendum (i.e., supported or opposed repeal), since it is assumed that a respondent's position on the referendum would not change (except due to recall). Figure 1 reports the main independent variables, their operational measures and their hypothesized relationships with individual vote choice.

## Findings

Table 1 reports the frequencies for each of the independent variables and vote choice. The trend between the May and October surveys is decidedly positive for Mayor Whitmire and almost equally negative for Welch. Positive ratings of Whitmire, her job performance and ability to guide the city's economic recovery gained from 6 to 16 points between the May and October polls. Though not reflective of her wide margin of victory in the November election (59 percent) Whitmire's candidacy gained 14 points among the panelists between May and October. Voter evaluations of Welch and support for his candidacy dropped during the same period, though not in equal proportion to Whitmire's gains. A separate analysis of *switchers* (Hurley and Wilson 1986) shows that Whitmire's gains came mostly from undecided voters and only a small portion from original Welch loyalists. This suggests that the 1985 Houston Mayoral election was a contest for the undecided vote, a vote overwhelmingly won by incumbent Mayor Whitmire (see discussion below).

**Figure 1. Concepts, Operational Measures, and Hypothesized Relationships with Vote Choice**

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Economic Development (*RECOVER*)

Survey Measure

*"Who do you feel is most capable of leading the city's economic recovery?"*

Coding

1 = Welch, 2 = Undecided, 3 = Whitmire

Hypothesized Relationship

Positive

Candidate Image (*IMAGE*)

Survey Measure

*"Do you have a very favorable, favorable, unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of Kathy Whitmire (Louie Welch)?"*

Coding

1 = Very Unfavorable, Unfavorable

2 = Undecided

3 = Favorable, Very Favorable

Hypothesized Relationship

Positive

Job Performance (*PERFORM*)

Survey Measure

*"How would you rate Mayor Kathy Whitmire's performance of her duties over the last four years?"*

Coding

1 = Poor, Fair

2 = Undecided

3 = Good, Excellent

Hypothesized Relationship

Positive

Redistributive Issue (*GAYRIGHTS*)

Survey Measure

*"Did you support or oppose the City's policy which prohibited discrimination against homosexuals in the hiring of city employees?"*

Coding

1 = Support

2 = Undecided

3 = Opposed

Hypothesized Relationship

Insignificant

Race (*RACE*)

Survey Measure

*Are you Anglo, Black, Hispanic, Asian or something else?"*

Coding

1 = White

2 = Black

Hypothesized Relationship

Insignificant

Table 1. Frequencies (%) for Selected Measures by Survey (N=186)

	Variable	May	August	October
<i>RECOVER</i>				
	Welch	46.2	44.6	40.9
	Undecided	11.8	8.0	9.6
	Whitmire	41.9	46.2	47.8
<i>IMAGE</i> (Whitmire)				
	Unfavorable	40.3	37.1	34.9
	Undecided	3.3	1.1	2.2
	Favorable	54.9	60.8	61.8
<i>PERFORM</i>				
	Poor-Fair	37.5	43.4	41.2
	Undecided	21.5	0.0	1.5
	Excellent-Good	40.9	56.6	58.1
<i>GAYRIGHTS</i>				
	Opposed	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Undecided	11.8	11.8	11.8
	Supported	66.1	66.1	66.1
<i>VOTE</i>				
	Welch	50.5	46.2	41.9
	Undecided	15.2	8.2	10.7
	Whitmire	33.3	45.7	47.3

Given the nominal and ordinal character of our main concepts, we need to use a function conforming to an S form (Cnudde and Aldrich 1978) to estimate our model of the urban vote decision. We have chosen the logit function since it provides the most direct means of comparing estimates for our measures when the distributions on the independent and dependent variables are assumed to be changing. This condition is particularly important to our analysis, since we want to demonstrate that our basic model of urban voting remains operative throughout the period of a campaign, and thus through changes in the basic distribution on all relevant variables. Logit analysis provides an unstandardized coefficient, analogous to a regression coefficient and a  $\chi^2$  test for the significance of each coefficient. These coefficients can be meaningfully compared across different time periods (i.e., surveys) since the presumed source of change in the coefficients, the means and standard deviations in the measured variables, are not set at 0 and 1 as is the case with standardized coefficients. A  $\chi^2$  square test between the predicted and observed measures of the dependent variable is provided along with a test of association (i.e., *gamma*) for the significance of the model's predictive power.

Our findings are presented in three parts. Initially we estimated the vote choice for our panel of respondents with four independent variables: *RECOVER*,

*IMAGE*, *PERFORM* and *GAYRIGHTS*. Based on the strength of individual coefficients, a more parsimonious model is estimated by eliminating redundant and insignificant variables from the model. The *RACE* variable is included after the initial estimation to determine if it has an independent effect on vote decision. Finally, interactive terms between *RACE* and the remaining determinants are examined for evidence of Levine's superimposition of race on significant political issues.

The intercorrelations between independent variables do not indicate any significant problem of multicollinearity. As shown in Table 2, the correlations between independent variables in the May and August surveys do not exceed .64. Correlation coefficients for the October survey are slightly larger. *PERFORM*, *IMAGE*, and *RECOVER* have intercorrelations between .661 and .752. Correlations between *RACE*, *GAYRIGHTS*, and the other independent variables do not exceed .5 in any of the surveys. A careful examination of the three correlation matrices shows a distinct pattern to these inter-item correlations. The strength of the correlations between *PERFORM*, *RECOVER*, and *IMAGE* increases monotonically between the May and October surveys. This would suggest that as the election approaches, voter attitudes toward the candidates develop a greater degree of coherence and consistency, a finding that may reflect the influence of either voter sophistication, the effectiveness of campaign messages, or both.

Table 2. Inter-Item Correlation by Survey

<u>May</u>	VOTE	IMAGE	PERFORM	RECOVER	RACE	GAYRIGHTS
<i>Vote</i>		.731	.745	.062	-.413	.479
<i>Image</i>			.619	.129	-.344	.422
<i>Perform</i>				.128	-.209	.364
<i>Recover</i>					-.116	.187
<i>Race</i>						-.126
<u>August</u>	VOTE	IMAGE	PERFORM	RECOVER	RACE	GAYRIGHTS
<i>Vote</i>		.693	.680	.926*	-.443	.365
<i>Image</i>			.636	.641	-.291	.436
<i>Perform</i>				.617	-.290	.378
<i>Recover</i>					-.438	.359
<i>Race</i>						-.126
<u>October</u>	VOTE	IMAGE	PERFORM	RECOVER	RACE	GAYRIGHTS
<i>Vote</i>		.770*	.697	.840*	-.488	.366
<i>Image</i>			.752	.682	-.321	.347
<i>Perform</i>				.661	-.311	.217
<i>Recover</i>					-.371	.388
<i>Race</i>						-.059

\*p < .05

Table 3 reports the logit coefficients for the estimated models of individual vote choice. The predictive power of our model is extremely strong. The *gammas* between predicted and observed vote choices for all three models exceeded .9. As expected, the coefficients for *GAYRIGHTS* are insignificant in each of the three models. In spite of at least one candidate's efforts to make this issue a major theme of his campaign, voters clearly rejected the relevance of this issue to their vote decision. Moreover, rejection of this issue by the voters occurred early and throughout the campaign. This is the only consistent finding throughout the three estimated equations. No other variable produced a consistent set of insignificant coefficients for all three equations.

Consistent with our central proposition, the dominant determinant of vote choice is *RECOVER*, with significant coefficients in the August and October equations. The insignificant coefficient for this variable in May may be a function of question wording. The May survey only rated Whitmire's ability to lead the economic recovery, rather than the comparative evaluation with Welch, which was used in August and October. Moreover, the significant coefficient for *PERFORM* in the May equation may indicate that voters were at least thinking about one aspect of the Mayor's job description: that of economic developer. This interpretation is partially supported by the fact that when *PERFORM* drops out as a significant

Table 3. Logit Estimates of Individual Vote Choice (Chi<sup>2</sup>)

Variable	May	August	October
Intercept	-6.17 (5.69)	-13.27 (9.00)*	-7.65 (17.85)*
<i>PERFORM</i>	1.95 (10.67)*	.118 (1.70)	.790 (2.53)
<i>RECOVER</i>	.223 (.030)	4.03 (13.68)	3.07 (22.06*)
<i>IMAGE</i>	1.72 (7.99)	1.37 (1.94)	1.89 (9.60)*
<i>GAYRIGHTS</i>	-.389 (.80)	-.033 (.000)	.001 (.000)
-2 Log Likelihood ratio	115.43	142.43	166.40
Chi <sup>2</sup> of ratio	58.22*	87.27*	86.69*
Gamma:			
Predicted x Observed	.938*	.994*	.979*

\*p<.05

coefficient in the estimated models for vote choice in August and October, its zero-order correlation with *RECOVER* increases substantially, from .2128 in May to .617 and .661 in August and October respectively (see Table 2). The voters' evaluation of the Mayor's job performance in May was based on a wide range of activities, including her responsibility as the city's chief economic developer. By

August, however, the scope of the rating was defined more narrowly, emphasizing economic performance over the delivery of basic city services. The replacement of *PERFORM* by *RECOVER* as the dominant determinant of vote choice in the August and October models illustrates this refinement in voters' focus.

In our discussion of inter-item correlations it was suggested that, as the election approached, voters developed a greater consistency in their issue positions and candidate evaluations, particularly among *PERFORM*, *IMAGE* and *RECOVER*. The correlation between the former two increases respectably from .619 in May to .752 in October, but those between *IMAGE* and *RECOVER* and between *PERFORM* and *RECOVER* increase from .129 in May to .682 in October, and from .128 in May to .661 in October, respectively. These findings suggest that voters were combining their personal evaluations of the candidate with their specific judgement concerning which candidate they believed could best lead the city's economic recovery. *IMAGE* provides the voter a convenient receptacle with which to hold these candidate evaluations and perceptions, and may reflect the voters' need to economize in an environment loaded with campaign stimuli.

Table 4 reports the logit estimates for two revised models of individual vote choice. Model 1 replaces *GAYRIGHTS* with *RACE* and Model 2 replaces *PERFORM* and *RACE* with their interactive term. The logit estimates and fit of the model do not change in any significant way with the changes in Model 1. *RACE* has a significant but modest coefficient for the May and October surveys, suggesting that blacks are significantly more likely to vote for Whitmire, independent of their candidate evaluations and perceptions. The insignificance of the August *RACE* coefficient remains unexplained. Inspection of the correlation matrix in Table 2 fails to detect any possible explanation for this finding.

The interactive term in Model 2 was not statistically significant in any of the equations. Levine's notion that race is superimposed on all issues is not supported by the interaction of *RACE* and *PERFORM*. This judgement may be premature. Evaluation of the Mayor's job performance is not sufficiently specific enough to qualify as an issue. Since no other issue was identified in our survey as significantly related to vote choice, including *GAYRIGHTS*, it is possible that Levine's thesis needs to be tested in a more appropriate context: one in which there is a significant issue with which *RACE* can interact. It tentatively appears that *RACE* does have an independent impact on vote choice, albeit of non-issue character. In this regard, Wolfinger and Field's (1966) interest group explanation of urban politics would appear most appropriate.

## Discussion

A comparison of logit coefficients across the three models shows that our estimates of the vote decision are extremely stable throughout the nine-month campaign. This would suggest that the forces shaping individual vote choices in May remained largely unchanged in November. One interpretation of this finding

is that the 1985 mayoral campaign and the \$3.2 million spent by the principal candidates had an insignificant impact on the vote choices of a majority of the voters. This conclusion, though not incorrect, fails to consider that electoral campaigns are rarely intended to influence the vote choices of all or even a majority of the voters.

Table 4. Logit Estimates of Individual Vote Decisions With Race and Interactive Term (chi <sup>2</sup>)

Variable	May		August		October	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	-4.61 (2.70)	-3.41 (2.97)	-10.00 (4.27) *	-14.8 (10.5)*	-7.36 (.670)	-7.10 (33.8)
<i>RECOVER</i>	.095 (.010)	.730 (.580)	4.14 (14.7)*	4.61 (14.6)*	2.48 (28.2)*	2.64 (33.9)*
<i>IMAGE</i>	1.91 (10.8)*	2.34 (26.3)*	1.67 (2.10)	1.55 (2.53)	1.82 (10.8*)	1.88 (15.6)*
<i>RACE</i>	1.86 (4.18)*		1.28 (1.05)		2.77 (4.92)*	
<i>PERFORM</i>	2.52 (16.0)*		1.27 (1.49)		.229 (.240)	
<i>RACE x PERFORM</i>		.312 (2.69)		.725 (1.40)		.120 (.100)
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-2 Log Likelihood Ratio	166.9	166.9	192.4	192.4	214.3	214.3
Chi <sup>2</sup> of Ratio	77.72*	69.12*	117.8*	117.6*	108.3*	112.5*
Gamma: Predicted x Observed	.948*	.870*	.996*	.998*	.977*	.946*

\*p < .05

Given the size of their electorates and the scarcity of campaign resources, candidates must devise strategies to target campaign resources where they will net the greatest vote return. Candidates differentiate voters according to the strength of their support for different candidates. Voters with strong candidate commitments are not likely to be the object of any candidate's campaign efforts. Campaign strategies and resources are normally directed at the undecided voter or those voters whose depth of candidate support is shallow and susceptible to change.



As noted earlier, the 1985 Houston mayoral election appears to have been decided by voters uncommitted to either candidate in our May and August surveys. Though some Welch loyalists switched to Whitmire, the overwhelming majority of the *switchers* were made up of voters undecided in May or August moving to Whitmire's camp by the October survey. For these voters the campaign clearly had an impact on their vote choice, although this impact was different for each candidate's campaign. Whitmire's campaign messages were positively received by the majority of undecided voters, while Welch's attempts to attract the support of these voters failed. Our analysis suggests that Whitmire correctly understood the limits on city policy and chose not to defend her support of the gay rights ordinance. Welch's decision to emphasize the gay rights issue reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of urban public policy and politics. Consistent with our main thesis, voters, including Welch loyalists, rejected the gay rights issue as irrelevant to their vote choice for mayor. Even if we assume that Welch loyalists gave their support to him solely on the basis of the issue, Welch's decision to emphasize the issue was still a major mistake. Welch's campaign was directed at the wrong voters about the wrong issue. Speaking to his hard-core supporters about the dangers of the gay lifestyle was a misallocation of campaign resources. Minimally, Welch should have addressed his campaign messages to the undecided voter, by whom the outcome of the November election was decided.

### Conclusion

Voters are aware of the constraints on municipal government and are not easily swayed by symbolic appeals. They realize that cities are not like nations or states and therefore will not be relevant players across many issue areas. The scope and nature of urban public policy and politics differs greatly from what we observe at the national and state levels. Moreover, there is an important relationship between city policy and city politics. The position cities occupy in the American federal system dictates that economic development will dominate the policy agenda of all municipal governments. In turn, this concern with protecting a city's borders defines the scope and nature of urban politics, specifically its aversion to redistributive politics and policies. Failure to recognize the limits to municipal public policy and how these limits define urban politics can render any campaign for municipal public office impotent.

This study of the 1985 Houston mayoral election may be considered "dated" by some scholars who consider only the latest election as fertile ground for the testing of theory-based assertions. Its significant findings admittedly do not confirm a federalist explanation of municipal elections. The findings do, however, support the hypotheses generated by the functional responsibility theory. As a pilot study, this analysis suggests the need for further investigation, specifically more panel studies of registered voters in various cities across multiple elections. Such research should include city council elections in which council-members and their

opponents espouse different policy preferences as well as belong to different racial and ethnic groups. Only after urban scholars make such an effort will the relationship between city policies and city politics be better understood.

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