Growth at the fringe: The influence of political fragmentation in United States metropolitan areas

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Abstract Urban sprawl has evolved into an exceptionally complex public policy problem in the United States over the course of recent decades. One factor that has made it particularly difficult to deal with is its relationship to the fragmented structure of the American system of land use governance. Acting on behalf of their residents, local governments enact land use regulations to secure lifestyle preferences for low density, suburban living environments while at the same time ensuring a high quality of public service provision. This article examines the effect of this process on metropolitan spatial structure through a series of econometric models designed to test the following hypothesis: that fragmentation promotes sprawl by increasing the proportion of growth that occurs at the unincorporated urban fringe. The estimation results reveal substantive evidence that municipal fragmentation and several related factors – including special districts, infrastructure investments, and white flight processes – have a significant and enduring effect on the growth of outlying areas.

JEL classification: C31, R11, R14, R52

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1 Introduction

Urban sprawl is characterized as the low density, suburban and exurban style development patterns that have emerged as the dominant mode of growth in the United States over the last several decades. By the end of the 20th century, metropolitan areas nationwide were expanding outward at a much faster rate than they were adding population, as both people and jobs continued to locate far from traditional urban centers (Fulton et al. 2001; Glaeser et al. 2001). While many factors have contributed to the rise of sprawl, the American system of land use governance itself has played a major role, through its emphasis on “home rule” authority and locally oriented fiscal policy. In particular metropolitan areas become more spread out as local governments use low-density zoning and other land use controls to bolster their tax bases and ensure a high level of public service provision. Because of the strict limitations this places on the supply of developable space inside of incorporated areas, a significant proportion of growth ends up being pushed to unincorporated areas at the urban fringe, where land remains inexpensive and comparatively free from regulation. Eventually, new jurisdictions form around these outlying growth centers, creating a self-reinforcing pattern of fragmentation and sprawl (Carruthers and Ulfarsson 2002a).

In this way, sprawl has evolved into one of the most vexing problems encountered by contemporary urban and regional policy. Via a recurring cycle, metropolitan areas continue to spread outward, spurred forward by the autonomy of local governments and their land use regulations. Recent evidence from rapid growth states demonstrates that this pattern has a substantive impact on urban spatial structure, and that it takes place over an interval between one and five years in length (Carruthers and Ulfarsson 2002a; Carruthers 2002). Is this process at work nationwide? How long does it take to occur? And, finally, how does the experience of rapid growth states differ from national trends?

This article responds to these questions by examining the effect that political fragmentation has on the proportion of growth, that occurs at the unincorporated fringe of United States metropolitan areas. The objectives of the analysis are threefold. First, the background discussion reviews previous research on fragmentation and sprawl, emphasizing the cyclical nature of their relationship. Second, the empirical analysis develops a series of econometric models for examining the impacts of political fragmentation during the mid 1990s. Two separate sets of models are estimated: one for all metropolitan counties nationwide, and another for the same metropolitan counties examined in previous analyses. The research design allows the impacts of fragmentation, public infrastructure investments, property taxes, and other factors to be traced over multiple years, enabling observation of how they affect the distribution of metropolitan population growth through time. Finally, the results of the analysis are used to outline several conclusions and directions for future research. These reinforce the findings of previous research but, in so doing, also underscore the need to develop a more explicit theoretical basis for understanding how fragmentation shapes metropolitan land markets to produce the outcomes observed here.