Neighborhoods that Matter: How Place and People Affect Political Participation

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BOOK ABSTRACT

In my book *Neighborhoods that Matter*, I demonstrate that neighborhood design does matter, because it affects civic engagement. Past scholarship has shown that neighborhood design affects the environment, the physical and mental health of residents, the local economy, and social equity. What I show is that neighborhood design also impacts civic health—the level of political engagement of the residents who live there. My argument is that when neighborhoods are built so that they isolate, require cars and driving, and are zoned for single-use, this design stifles civic engagement. However, when neighborhoods are designed so that they bring people together, are walkable, and are mixed-use, they help revitalize public life.

Using an innovative method for measuring neighborhood design—I "virtually walked" over 850 census tracts across the United States in Google Streetview—I find that neighborhood design affects individual civic engagement in two ways. First, good design helps reduce the cost of participation directly. By designing places that are interactive, pedestrian-centered, and mixed-use, design removes obstacles to participation and therefore, more people from various backgrounds have greater access to civic engagement. Second, design affects individual participation indirectly. Design can either help facilitate exposure between neighbors or reduce it. By increasing opportunities for neighborly interactions, design contributes to a sense of competition, conflict, and a need for collective action amongst residents; this is especially true in neighborhoods with greater racial and class diversity. The subsequent effect of increased competition and conflict is greater political participation. Reducing obstacles alongside with increasing conflict and competition creates the perfect environment for a vibrant and engaging civic life. This is where neighborhoods and neighbors matter most.

RESEARCH PUZZLE

As people flocked to the suburbs at the turn of the century, vibrant neighborhood life was often lost. And despite the fact that education levels were increasing during this period causing social scientists to anticipate a spike in civic engagement, political participation declined as well. Social critics have seen the two developments as linked (Jackson 1985; Jacobs 1961; Oldenburg 1999; Putnam 2000). The pre-war, urban neighborhood design was historically pedestrian-centered—people lived, worked and played in the same place (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1995; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 2001; Hirschhorn 2005; Jacobs 1961; Oldenburg 1999; Oliver 2001; Williamson and Dunham-Jones 2021). Streets were gridded, narrow and tree-lined, making it easier and more comfortable for residents to traverse by foot. Homes were designed with front porches, possessed low-fenced front yards, and lacked garages, providing residents with comfortable and visible spaces to encounter neighbors. But these neighborhood features gave way to the suburban community's more car-oriented design (Jackson 1985; Jacobs 1961; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1995; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 2001; Hirschhorn 2005; Speck 2012). The new communities possess decentralized zoning that divides cities into clearly defined residential, commercial, and public spaces (Rothstein 2017; Trounstine 2018). Streets were widened and truncated with cul-de-sacs. Homes were built on larger lots and had garage-dominated facades; usable front yards gave way to private backyards.

Past scholarship has demonstrated that these changes in design have been linked to a whole range of societal ills; these include negative consequences for: the environment, mental and physical health, local economies, and social equity (Dannenberg et. al 2011; Hirschhorn 2005; Talen and Lee 2018; Williamson and Dunham-Jones 2021). *Neighborhoods that Matter* asks: How did these changes in design also impact civic health? This book examines how the physical attributes of neighborhoods impacts individual civic engagement.

ARGUMENT

Throughout *Neighborhoods that Matter,* I offer a new model of political participation: The Place and People Model (PPM). PPM considers how both neighborhoods and neighbors affect the Cost-Benefit Ratio Anthony Downs offered as an explanation for when and why people would vote (1957). To Downs' model, I add the consideration of both access to resources (like time, money, information) and psychological motivators (like empowerment, racial threat, and competition). When individuals have access to resources and are activated by these psychology motivators, this helps them overcome the costs of participation and increases their civic engagement. I argue that the places where individuals live (neighborhoods) and the people who live around them (neighbors) affect access to these resources and help activate these psychological motivators, both of which alter the Cost-Benefit ratio and subsequently impact an individual's decision of whether or not to participate. Overall, I argue that when neighborhood design is pedestrian-centered, interactive, and mixed-use, these features help provide residents with resources and activate psychological motivators in two ways: directly and indirectly.

First, I argue that design has a direct effect on individual political participation. By building neighborhoods that are at a pedestrian scale, interactive, and mixed-use, residents save personal resources (like time and money). In addition, design also helps reduce the cost of civic engagement, for example, by removing the need for a personal vehicle. While these two phenomena may appear similar, they are different. The first argues that design can impact the amount of resources one has in her pocket and the second argues that design also influences the cost of entry. By saving residents' resources and reducing the price of entry for participation, neighborhood design is helping to weaken a common barrier for civic engagement—personal resource shortfalls—which subsequently makes it easier for all people to participate, but especially those with the least.

Second, I argue that through neighbors, design has an indirect effect on individual political participation. Past scholars anticipated that design would either help create or hinder opportunities for neighbors to spontaneously meet on city sidewalks (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1995; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 2001; Jacobs 1961; Oldenburg 1999; Putnam 2000). They argued that these unplanned contacts would subsequently lead to the exchange of key political resources (like information and mobilization); however, I do not find compelling evidence that design impacts this type of informal neighboring. I argue instead that when design is walkable, interactive, and mixed-use, it does increase neighborly exposure, which subsequently activates a whole range of psychological phenomena that are known to affect individual participation, like: empowering residents with political efficacy and activating perceived racial threat. By exposing neighbors to one another more frequently, neighborhood design that is walkable, interactive, and mixed-use can impact a sense of empowerment, conflict, and/or competition, which subsequently increases individual political participation. Neighborhoods that lack these features, however, avoid the activation of these psychological motivators, which depresses overall civic engagement.

The Place and People Model of political participation, presented in *Neighborhoods that Matter,* demonstrates that when we are thoughtful about how we design neighborhoods, we can construct places that are vibrant hubs of civic engagement.

BOOK CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1—We All Live in Neighborhoods: When and Why Place and People Matter

Chapter 1 of *Neighborhoods that Matter* lays out the book's overarching question: Why might neighborhood design matter and how might it impact the civic behavior of the people who live there? The chapter begins by describing the many ways in which scholarship has established why and how neighborhood and city design impacts a whole range of public phenomena, including: public health, the environment and social equity (Jackson 1985; Jacobs 1961; Dannenberg et al 2011; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1995; Duany and Plater-Zyberk 2001; Hirschhorn 2005; Oldenburg 1999; Speck 2012). It goes on to describe the speculative claims that design may also impact civic life. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the book's argument that neighborhood design—when it is pedestrian-centered, interactive, and mixed-use—can help reduce obstacles to political participation, subsequently increasing engagement amongst all people, but especially those with the greatest resource shortfalls. The chapter ends with an overview of the book's remaining chapters.

Chapter 2—A Contextual Approach to Participation: Introduction to Place and People Model

Chapter 2 develops the book's theoretical framework and introduces the *Place and People Model of Political Participation* (PPM). The chapter begins by describing the three determinants that we have come to know affect who and why people participate in politics: access to personal resources (i.e. time, money, skills, etc.), psychological motivators (i.e. social pressure, interest, competition, etc.), and mobilization (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). It next describes how access to these resources impacts the standard cost-benefit ratio individuals use to decide when they will participate (Downs 1957). From here, the chapter then lays out the ways in which neighborhood design may impact both access to resources and this cost-benefit ratio, subsequently changing when people will participate. This updated ratio is the PPM. The remainder of the chapter then describes the two pathways through which PPM predicts neighborhood design will impact individuals' cost-benefit calculations. The first describes a direct pathway through which design affects individual engagement by either increasing or decreasing her access to personal resources. The second describes an indirect pathway through which design affects individuals' level of civic engagement through neighboring. The argument put forward is that design can either facilitate or inhibit opportunities for neighbors to encounter one another; these encounters subsequently impact individuals' abilities to gain political resources through their neighbors or alternatively, experience psychological motivators (i.e. civic duty, perceived racial/class threat, empowerment, etc.) that impact individual civic engagement (Enos 2016; Enos 2017; Fraga 2018; Hill and Leighley 1999; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; McClurg 2003; Skjaeveland and Garling 1997; Spence and McClerking 2010;). Throughout the chapter, I describe the key hypotheses I set out to test in later chapters.

Chapter 3—Coding Design: Description of Methods and Sample Neighborhoods

Chapter 3 provides a description of how I measure the three key features of design—pedestrian-centered, interactive, and mixed-use—that are the primary focus of my analysis. These include past proxy measures—commuting rate, age of housing stock—and the Interactive Design Score I developed (Hopkins and Williamson 2012 and Oliver 2001). A significant portion of the chapter is dedicated to providing a detailed description of the innovative method I developed to measure the interactivity of neighborhood design. Specifically, I describe how I "virtually walked" over 850 census tracts across the United States in Google Streetview to code the presence of particular design features: sidewalks, porches, tree-lined streets, attached garages, cul-de-sacs, etc. After describing the three key measures of design, the chapter then provides descriptions of sample neighborhoods that score low to high on these three measures. This helps readers visualize the difference between a neighborhood with a design that does or does not meet the criteria for pedestrian-centered, interactive, and mixed-use, which is a key component of the book's argument.

Chapter 4—Porches and People: How Traditional Urban Design Affects Participation and Neighboring

Chapter 4 lays the groundwork for the *Place and People Model of Political Participation*. It begins by examining whether a direct path between neighborhood design and individual participation exists. I show that people who live in neighborhoods dominated by walkable, interactive, and mixed-use design features do participate in a whole range of civic acts at higher rates than those who do not live in such neighborhoods. The chapter then goes on to examine the indirect path between neighborhood design and participation, which I argue is mediated by neighbors. I first demonstrate that folks who engage with their neighbors more frequently are also more likely to participate in a whole host of forms of civic engagement. I then examine whether neighborhood design affects the frequency of neighboring, whether that be: talking to their neighbors, coordinating with their neighbors, or joining neighborhood groups. The chapter reveals that while neighborhood design does not appear to impact informal forms of neighboring (i.e. spontaneous conversations on city streets), design does influence formal forms of neighboring (i.e. coordinating with neighbors and joining neighborhood groups). The chapter ends by discussing the significance of these findings and presenting questions that will be further explored in future chapters.

Chapter 5—A Rising Tide or a Helping Hand: Who Benefits Most from Neighborhood Design?

Chapter 5 takes a deeper dive into the direct relationship between neighborhood design and individual political participation. The chapter begins by reintroducing the reader to the *Place and People Model* described in Chapter 2, which argues that the reason that neighborhood design impacts individual civic engagement directly is because it helps preserve personal resources (like time and money) and also helps reduce the cost of participation (e.g. by removing the need for a personal vehicle). The chapter then moves on to test this claim. The takeaway from this chapter is that while walkable, interactive, and mixed-use design benefits all individuals' civic engagement, low resourced folks benefit most, when the cost of participation is low or moderate (like for voting, volunteering, and marching). This supports PPM's claim that neighborhood design can protect personal resources and reduce the cost of participation, because thoughtful design provides the extra boost those who experience the greatest resource shortfalls (the poor, less educated, and disproportionately People of Color) need to overcome the obstacles of participation. For those who already have access to resources (the wealthy, educated, and disproportionately white people), design matters little for these low and moderate cost forms of engagement because they are already better positioned to overcome the costs of political participation. However, for these most privileged individuals, design matters more for high cost forms of participation, like joining political groups. Again, this is consistent with what PPM anticipates.

Chapter 6—Now I See You, Now I Don't: How Design Hides or Highlights Co-Racial Neighbors

Chapter 6 provides a closer examination of the indirect relationship between neighborhood design and individual political participation. The chapter begins by reconnecting the reader with the *Place and People Model's* claim that when neighborhood design is pedestrian-centered, interactive, and mixed-use, it increases opportunities for neighborly encounters. These neighborly encounters are thought to subsequently activate psychological motivators, like empowerment and racial threat, which are known to affect individual civic engagement. After describing these claims, the chapter proceeds with testing them. The overarching takeaway is that thoughtful neighborhood design affects individual civic engagement indirectly, but that this is dependent on the racial and class composition of the neighborhood. Specifically, I find that thoughtful design features increase neighborly conflict in diverse neighborhoods but not in homogenous neighborhoods. It is this neighborly conflict which subsequently increases individual civic engagement. The chapter ends with a discussion of the significance of this finding.

Chapter 7—Conclusion: Place, People and Political Participation in a Gentrifying World

Chapter 7 begins with a description of emerging residential patterns. Specifically, it describes the displacement of the least resourced—disproportionately People of Color—from city centers (historically human-scale design) into the suburbs (historically car-oriented design) (Frey 2014; Nelson 2013; Watts-Smith and Greer 2019). The chapter then connects the book's overarching finding that neighborhood design, when it is walkable, interactive, and mixed-use, increases civic engagement, with this emerging residential pattern. It proposes that a significant consequence of the displacement of the United States' poorest residents into the suburbs is that the already wide participation gap between the most privileged and the least will continue to expand. The chapter offers some recommendations for how cities can and should renovate their neighborhoods in order to build more civically vibrant places, but also to improve the environment, the physical and mental well-being of their residents, and improve social equity for all. The chapter ends by providing questions for future study, including a need to more closely examine how gentrification changes the design of once pedestrian-centered, interactive, and mixed-use neighborhoods, and what the consequences to these changes are for civic engagement.

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