

Why We Should Study Smaller Cities

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Abstract

Scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of urban and local politics, as a significant amount of policymaking and implementation occurs at this tier of government. We conduct a systematic review of this emerging literature, and find that the vast majority are about major metropolitan areas. This makes sense for a number of practical reasons: there is greater attention from the media on larger cities; it is easier for academics to physically reach major cities to conduct their fieldwork; and larger cities often have higher government capacity, leading to greater data availability. Yet we know little about smaller cities, where large numbers of people live as well. The UN estimates that 55% of the world's population in 2018 lived in urban areas, a large percentage in smaller cities. This holds in both urbanizing and urbanized areas. In India, where urbanization is happening rapidly, about 82% of the 377.1 million urban citizens live *outside* major metropolitan areas (2011 Indian Census). Even in Europe, where rates of rural-urban growth have slowed, 20% of the population and 20.7% of GDP still come from smaller metropolitan regions (Eurostat 2016). Furthermore, insights from the existing research on larger metropolitan areas may not always inform our knowledge and theory about these understudied political units. Using examples from both developing and OECD countries, we show that politics in smaller cities are systematically different than in larger cities. Smaller cities are less exposed to international trade and culture. They receive less funding from foreign direct investment and in intergovernmental transfers. They have largely different patterns of in- and out-migration. And local politics in smaller cities are often less nationalized, leading to different types of candidates seeking and reaching office. We suggest that scholars of urban and local politics consider a broad range of municipalities in their case study research, and moreover consider the ways that smaller cities might differ from larger cities.