

Unanswered Questions: Why Citizens Are Frustrated with Local Government and What Public Managers Can Do About It

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Abstract

In a recent survey of U.S. adults, only 36.5% of those who report having directly contacted their local government at least once in the last year rated their local government's response time to the request or inquiry as either somewhat fast or very fast. Approximately 58% report that their local government was either somewhat helpful or very helpful. This book project, which includes a significant data collection effort examines three key questions: (1) To what degree are local constituents facing administrative burden in their interactions with their local governments? (2) Why are some local governments better able to reduce the administrative burden their residents face when requesting information or services? And (3) What can local public managers and elected officials do to reduce administrative burden and improve their responsiveness to citizen requests for services or information? I will collect novel data on medium and large municipalities (population of 50,000 or more) to create measures of different aspects of administrative burden faced by individual residents and by business owners. I will use these measures to create an index of the overall level of administrative burden faced by constituents of each municipality. This index will allow for direct comparison of the administrative burden in medium and large sized municipalities in the United States. Using these measures and additional municipal level data, I examine the factors that contribute to local administrative burden. Finally, based on my analysis and qualitative interviews with constituents, local public managers, and local elected officials, I offer substantive suggestions as to what local officials can do to reduce administrative burden at the local level and improve local government responsiveness to local residents.

***Note:** This is a draft research proposal for an extensive data collection effort. I have not begun data collection for this project. I am currently working on a NSF grant proposal to obtain the funds necessary to hire the research assistants required to complete a project of this scope. Any feedback on the project's aims or data collection methods is welcome and appreciated.

Introduction

When citizens make contact with their local governments, whether to seek services or information, their experience often varies. While some citizens may find that their local government offers the requested services or information in a timely and helpful manner, others do not. The constituent experience when interacting with their local government can shape their assessment of, attitude toward, and trust in government. As Moynihan et al. (2014) explain, “Our experience of government is shaped through the burdens we encounter in our interactions with the state” (43). Data collected through the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) in 2016 suggest that a significant proportion of Americans are not receiving helpful and or timely responses upon making contact with their local government with a request for services or information. Approximately 30.6% of American adults who contacted their local government at least once in the last year report that the response they received was either somewhat slow or very slow and nearly a quarter (24.8%) say that the response was either very unhelpful or somewhat unhelpful. These survey results suggest that at least one out of every four citizens who contact their local government with a request for services or information is facing significant administrative burden in having that request fulfilled.

However, administrative burden at the local level does not impact only individual residents, but also business owners and companies. In a recent Prism Creative Group “Support Local” small business survey, approximately 90% of business owners say they wouldn’t have opened a business if they knew what the process would be like, with many citing navigating the local permitting process as a key reason for their answer (Nebhrajani 2017). In fact, navigating local regulations and local permitting and licensing requirements has spurred the growth of a new industry: permit expediting. It is now regular practice in some cities, particularly those with the most burdensome regulations and permitting requirements, for individuals attempting to start a business, particularly brick and mortar establishments, to hire private firms or individuals who

have existing relationships with local government officials to provide guidance in navigating the local permitting process (Nebhrajani 2017). That these “permit expediting” companies exist at all suggests that the degree of administrative burden associated with starting a business in some municipalities is severe enough that individuals are willing to pay a third-party to navigate the process and take on the administrative burden for them. However, when administrative burden becomes so severe that would be business owners are incentivized to hire private “permit expeditors” to navigate the permit process for them, this could have a negative impact on economic development by making it such that individuals without significant start-up capital are unable to start a business at all. Such sever administrative burden may also put small businesses at a disadvantage compared to large companies with more resources (both time and money) to navigate the local permitting process.

Administrative burden can be defined as an individual’s “experience of policy implementation as onerous” (Burden et al. 2012, 742). Any time an individual, whether an individual resident or a small business owner, makes contact with his or her local government to access services or information, he or she may experience burden. As Burden et al. 2014 explain, “When a policy is burdensome, it may require the individual to respond with what he or she sees as a high level of resources” (742). When a policy or rule serves no useful purpose, it meets Bozeman’s (2000) red tape standard, but even policies and rules that do serve a useful purpose (such as rules that restaurants undergo health and safety inspections) can create administrative burden for the individual.

There are several broad categories of costs that individuals face when interacting with their government to seek access to services or information. Moynihan et al. (2014) outline three components of administrative burden: learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs. Learning costs arise from the collection of information, psychological costs stem from “the loss of autonomy and increase in stress arising from program processes,” and compliance costs

accrue from requirements to complete paperwork and provide documentation (Moynihan et al. 2014). The combination of learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs can lead to citizen frustration with government and negative perceptions of government as an institution and of specific government policies.

While the study of administrative burden is a growing field of inquiry in public administration, a corollary to studies of red tape, little work has systematically measured or examined the varying degree of administrative burden faced by residents and business owners at the local level. Yet, we know from recent survey data that a significant proportion of individuals do perceive some degree of administrative burden in their interactions with their local government. However, we lack any systematic measure of administrative burden at the local level that would allow scholars and practitioners alike to assess the degree of administrative burden faced by constituents of municipalities throughout the United States. Without such a systematic measure of administrative burden, scholars are unable to empirically examine some key research questions related to administrative burden at the local level. For example, why are some local governments better able than others to reduce the administrative burden their residents face when requesting information or services? What can local officials do to improve their responsiveness to citizen requests for services or information?

Municipal governments have a vested interest in creating jobs and economic opportunities for their residents, particularly as they compete with each other to provide desired services at a price residents are willing to pay in the form of housing costs and property taxes (Tiebout 1956). Cities adopt policies and programs that advance their interests in economic development, social prestige, and political power (Peterson 1981), and they seek to maximize the services and amenities offered while minimizing the price residents pay for such services. While the price that residents pay for local services and amenities has often been conceptualized as their tax burden and the fees they pay for specific services, I argue that the “price” residents pay

goes beyond their financial burden but encompasses the costs associated with administrative burdens: learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs. This is true of both individuals moving to or living in a city and seeking services (such as trash collection) or permits (to renovate a home) and individuals contacting the local government for services or permits required to start a business.

In order to answer the two research questions posed above, it is imperative to create valid and reliable measures of administrative burden at the local level. However, there has been little systematic effort to measure administrative burden, specifically the learning, psychological, and compliance costs that make up administrative burden, at the local level throughout the United States. I have three overarching goals for this project. The first is to systematically measure the degree of administrative burden faced by individuals, both individual residents and business owners, in their interaction with their local government as they seek to access information or services. The second is to examine why some local governments have lower levels of administrative burden than others. The third is to develop an understanding of what local public managers and elected officials alike can do to reduce the degree of administrative burden faced by their constituents. Simply creating a measure of administrative burden for local governments throughout the United States will facilitate much future research, including an understanding of the impact of administrative burden on a variety of factors, such as citizen trust in government and business willingness to operate in specific cities. However, the goal of this specific project is to create such a measure and understand why some local governments have a higher degree of administrative burden than others.

Measuring Administrative Burden at the Local Level

To my knowledge, no systematic database exists which measures the degree of administrative burden faced by constituents (whether individual residents or business owners) at

the local level in the United States. The World Bank has developed *Doing Business* rankings that measure aspects of business regulation in one or two cities in each of 189 countries, but there is no similar measure for all municipalities within the United States. Further, the World Bank *Doing Business* measures measure administrative burden only so far as it relates to starting and operating a business, not the degree of administrative burden faced by individual residents simply seeking to access services or comply with local regulations.

As the foundation of this research project, I will develop a systematic measure of administrative burden at the local level for medium and large cities (those with a population of 50,000 or more people) throughout the United States. This measure of administrative burden will encompass the administrative burden faced by individual residents and business owners alike as they seek access to information and/or services from their local governments. In order to develop this measure, I will consider several factors, some specific to the individual resident and some specific to the business owner, though some of these factors will overlap. I will include an analysis of local ordinances, survey responses from local constituents, and observational data collected through requests made of local governments to develop measures of several key factors that together measure overall administrative burden at the local level.

First, in order to ascertain the degree to which policies themselves create administrative burden, specifically compliance costs, I will analyze the text of local ordinances. For the individual resident I will analyze local ordinances to ascertain the monetary cost of compliance with a selection of ordinances such as the cost to obtain a variety of permits like those needed for a home renovation, to hold an event at a local park, to register a home alarm, etc. I will also measure the documentation required to obtain a variety of services from the local government, such as a library card or bulky trash pick-up. For the business owner, I will analyze the text of local ordinances to obtain the monetary cost of compliance to obtain all permits required to open a business within the city. This will include such things as building permits, health and safety

permits, liquor licenses, and occupational licenses. I will also include a measure of the total amount of documentation required to obtain these permits and licenses. Finally, the measurement of compliance costs will include a measure of the permitting fees, property tax, and business tax rates charged in each city.

In order to measure the learning costs in each city, I will take a multi-pronged approach. The first task is to analyze the text of city websites to rank the degree to which each website provides useful and clear information on a list of specific topics, including the procedure to obtain permits or to request a service. In order to rank the ease/difficulty of gathering information, I am considering two approaches. The first is to use a series of focus groups to rate the degree to which each website provides clear information on a variety of topics using a Likert scale (very clear, somewhat clear, somewhat unclear, very unclear) and the ease of locating that information using a Likert scale (very easy, somewhat easy, somewhat difficult, very difficult). Using this approach, I will assign each member of a focus group to review a municipal website and rate the clarity and ease of locating information related to a number of local services and regulations, such as information on how to obtain building permits, how to request a code enforcement officer conduct an inspection, how to obtain and qualify for a library card or how to register and qualify for swim lessons. The second approach is to have a team of research assistants under my direction review each city's website to measure the degree to which each website provides useful and clear information regarding the local services and regulations, and the eligibility requirements for specific programs. Under this second approach, rather than using individuals participating in a focus group, I would use a team of research assistants who would conduct the same tasks using the same Likert scale as described above for the focus groups.

The second task in measuring learning costs is to assess the amount of time it takes to get information from the city when a specific request is sent to them. In order to do this, I will make e-mail requests for information of each local government included in the study to track the total

time it takes to respond and the helpfulness and accuracy of the response provided. For example, I will email each city in the study asking whether a permit is required to build an interior closet or asking for a list of documents required to obtain a library card (See Appendix B for example emails). Tracking the time of the response to these questions will be relatively straightforward based on the e-mail timestamps. In order to rate the helpfulness and accuracy of the response provided, I will compare the local government's response to each email inquiry to that city's own ordinances to assess the degree to which the response provided is accurate per the municipal code. Additionally, as part of this second prong of the approach to measuring learning costs, I will measure the total number of contacts required in order to get a complete response. In other words, does the first person to respond to the email request provide a response to the question or do they simply refer the inquiry to another person or department, then does that second person or department provide a response to the question or do they again refer the inquiry to another person or department, and so on.

The third and final prong of measuring learning costs is a survey of individuals living in each of the cities included in the study. The study will ask those who have contacted their local government during the past year to rate the degree to which they found the local government response to be helpful and timely. See Appendix A for question wording. National survey data I collected on the 2016 CCES using the same question wording will provide a national baseline for these questions to which responses collected at the local level can be compared.

Measuring the psychological costs as a component of administrative burden is perhaps the most difficult task. Psychological costs relate to the stigma of participating in an unpopular program and the increased stress that develops as a reaction to attempting to comply with program or service requirements (Moynihan 2014). These psychological costs are best ascertained through survey data or the self-reporting of a random sample of citizens (both

individual residents and business owners) who have recently interacted with their local government in an attempt to gain information or access to services. Therefore, in order to measure psychological costs as a component of administrative burden, I will include questions on the survey sent to local residents that inquire about the degree to which they felt they were treated with respect, their assessment of how intrusive the local government official was in the interaction, and the degree of stress that they experienced as a result of contacting their local government. See Appendix A for question wording. Finally, as a part of the analysis of psychological costs, I will submit a public records request to each municipality included in the to gather information on (a) the average time taken to issue permits from the date of first request and (b) the average time to complete a citizen request for service. I include the time to complete requests as a psychological cost, because as the time required to complete a request increases, so too does constituent frustration and stress stemming from the administrative burden.

Table 1. Measurement Approach – Administrative Burden at the Local Level

| <i>Type of Cost</i> | <i>Concept</i> | <i>Measurement</i> |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Learning | Website Provides Useful Information | Focus group or research assistants? |
| | Website Provides Clear Information | Focus group or research assistants? |
| | Time of Response | Observational data from emails |
| | | Survey responses |
| | Helpfulness of Response | Observational data from emails |
| Survey responses | | |
| Compliance | Documentation Required | Text analysis of municipal code |
| | Monetary Cost | Text/website analysis to determine cost to obtain variety of permits/licenses/services |
| | Tax Burden | Collection of business and property tax rates |
| Psychological | Treated with Respect | Survey responses |
| | Intrusiveness | Survey responses |
| | Stress | Survey responses |
| | Time to Permit | Public records request from each municipality for data on average time to issue permits from date of first request |

Use of Local Administrative Burden Scores in Public Administration Research

As a result of this data collection effort, I will create a municipal administrative burden score (ABS) that is directly comparable from one city to another within the United States. See Table 1 for a full description of each concept that will be measured as a part of this project and to create the overall administrative burden score (ABS). Once the data has been collected and the administrative burden scores are available for all medium and large cities in the United States, I and other researchers will be able to answer key research questions in public administration related to administrative burden at the local level.

The first way in which I will use the administrative burden scores created through this data collection effort is in an examination of the factors that contribute to administrative burden at the local level. I will gather additional observational data at the municipal level and conduct a series of qualitative interviews with local public managers, administrators, and elected officials to seek to understand why some local governments have higher administrative burdens than others. From these qualitative interviews, I will seek to identify key factors that are associated with administrative burden at the local level. After identifying these specific factors, I will gather observational data that serve as operational measures for the key concepts identified through the qualitative interviews. For example, this may include measures of each municipality's fiscal capacity, administrative capacity, economic condition, political environment, and demographic characteristics. Once this data has been collected, I will empirically analyze the relationship between the key factors and a municipality's administrative burden score to further develop a scholarly understanding of what causes administrative burdens. Based on the findings from the development of the administrative burden scores, the qualitative interviews, and the empirical analysis of what causes administrative burdens, I will conclude the book with a discussion of what action local officials can take to reduce administrative burden in their municipality. While there are certain aspects of burden that the local government has little control over (such as the

social stigma attached to certain programs) there are other areas in which government actors can reduce burden, though whether governments should reduce burden and whether the impact of reducing burden on policy outcomes is desirable is a normative question. Setting aside this normative question and focusing rather on the citizen experience of interacting with their local government, I will offer substantive suggestions for how local governments can address some of the systematic drivers of administrative burden (such as time to complete requests and documentation required to receive access to services).

This project will focus exclusively on measuring administrative burden at the local level and examining the factors that cause higher levels of administrative burden. However, it is my hope that this extensive data collection effort and the measurement of local administrative burden will foster a new line of scholarly inquiry into the experiences that citizens and business owners have when interacting with their local government in an attempt to gain access to information or services. In their 2014 article, Moynihan et al. call for more scholarly research into how administrative burdens impact inequality and how administrative burdens affect citizens. Prior research in which scholars examine specific programs or policy areas suggest that burden may impact citizens differently based on class, race and gender (Aizer 2003, Brodtkin and Mamjundar 2010, Heckman and Smith 2003, Rigby and Springer 2011). However, these studies look only at one program or they focus at the state or national level. The administrative burden scores created for each U.S. municipality as a result of this data collection effort will allow scholars to examine these and other research questions in the local government context and with a scope that extends beyond only one program or policy area. I hope that this data will be used to analyze how burdens impact policy outcomes, compliance with local ordinances, citizen assessment of local government (such as trust in government) and business owner decision making as to where to locate and operate their businesses. These are just a few examples of the way that scholars could use the data and measures created by this project to further the study of

local administrative burden. Scholars could of course use the data to examine numerous other research questions and to advance the study of local governance.

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Appendix A. Survey Questions

Question 1:

Variable Type

SINGLE CHOICE

Variable Label

Frequency Local Government Contact

Question Text

During the last year, about how many times have you contacted your city or town government? This could include many different things, such as a request for documents, an application for a permit, a request to fill a pothole, a request for information about services, etc.

Response Options

- 1 Never
- 2 1-2 times
- 2 3-4 times
- 3 5 times or more

Question 2:

Variable Type

MULTIPLE CHOICE

Variable Label

City Contact Method

Programmer Instructions

This question should only be shown to the respondent if they answered 1-7 on the previous question. Respondents who answered 1 (“Never”) on the previous question should skip this question.

Question Text

Which of the following methods did you use to contact your city or town government? Select all that apply.

Response Options

- 1 In-person
- 2 Telephone call
- 3 Email
- 4 A form or page on the city or town website
- 5 Smartphone app
- 6 Social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram)
- 7 Other

Question 3:

Variable Type
SINGLE CHOICE

Variable Label
Speed of Local Response

Question Text
Thinking about all of the times that you requested information or a service from your city or town government over the last year, how would you rate the time it took them to respond?

Response Options
1 Very slow
2 Somewhat slow
3 Neither fast nor slow
4 Somewhat fast
5 Very fast

Question 4:

Variable Type
SINGLE CHOICE

Variable Label
Helpfulness of Local Response

Question Text
Thinking about all of the times that you requested information or a service from your city or town government over the last year, how would you rate the helpfulness of their response?

Response Options
1 Very unhelpful
2 Somewhat unhelpful
3 Neither helpful nor unhelpful
4 Somewhat helpful
5 Very Helpful

Question 5:

Variable Type
SINGLE CHOICE

Variable Label
Sense of Autonomy, Degradation

Question Text

Thinking about all of the times that you requested information or a service from your city or town government over the last year, how respectful and courteous were the city officials you interacted with?

Response Options

- 1 Very respectful and courteous
- 2 Somewhat respectful and courteous
- 3 Neither respectful and courteous
- 4 Somewhat respectful and courteous
- 5 Very respectful and courteous

Question 6:

Variable Type

SINGLE CHOICE

Variable Label

Sense of Autonomy, Intrusive

Question Text

Thinking about all of the times that you requested information or a service from your city or town government over the last year, how intrusive into your private or personal affairs were the city officials you interacted with?

Response Options

- 1 Very intrusive
- 2 Somewhat intrusive
- 3 Neither intrusive
- 4 Somewhat intrusive
- 5 Very intrusive

Question 7:

Variable Type

SINGLE CHOICE

Variable Label

Sense of Stress

Question Text

Thinking about all of the times that you requested information or a service from your city or town government over the last year, did your interaction with city officials increase or decrease your sense of stress?

Response Options

- 1 Greatly increased sense of stress
- 2 Somewhat increased sense of stress
- 3 Stress level did not change

- 4 Somewhat decreased sense of stress
- 5 Greatly decreased sense of stress

Question 8:

Variable Type

SINGLE CHOICE

Variable Label

Trying to Start Business

Question Text

Thinking about all of the times that you requested information or a service from your city or town government over the last year, did any of your interactions with the city relate to your desire or attempts to start a business within the city?

Response Options

- 1 Yes, my contact with the city did relate to starting a business.
- 2 No, my contact with the city did not relate to starting a business.

Appendix B. Examples of Email Questions to Measure Time and Accuracy of Response

Email One

Dear City Clerk,

In the city of _____, am I required to get a building permit if I want to build an interior closet with no electrical or plumbing components?

Thank you,

Name

Email Two

Dear City Clerk,

In the city of _____, am I required to get a cottage foods license if I want to bake cookies in my home kitchen and sell them at the local farmers market?

Thank you,

Name

Email Three

Dear City Clerk,

In the city of _____, what are the requirements to get a library card? Can you please tell me what documents I will need in order to get my library card?

Thank you,

Name