

# **Urban Advocacy Groups, City Governance, and the Pursuit of Sustainability in American Cities**

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### **Abstract**

We ask this question: Why do some cities decide to adopt policies and programs aimed at trying to become more sustainable, while other cities do not? We pursue our inquiry by closely examining surveys we conducted of city councilors and administrators in 50 large American cities. The specific focus is on the interaction between advocacy groups and policymakers. The data utilized draws on questions concerning contact between groups and officials, the attitude of officials toward the reliability of information given to them by groups, and the likelihood of different advocacy group sectors being included in collaborative policymaking. Strong patterns emerged from the data analysis. First, we find low barriers to entry for urban advocacy groups. In stark contrast to Washington politics, it is relatively easy for urban groups to gain access to important policymakers and to meet with them frequently. Second, we find that neighborhood associations demonstrate surprising levels of interaction with policymakers. Despite scant resources, neighborhood associations are clearly part of the policymaking process in urban systems. Third, contact with different group sectors and degree of inclusiveness of those sectors in policymaking is linked to policymakers' support for environmental protection and for sustainability. When environmental groups and labor unions are included in deliberations on issues of economic development and the environment, there seems to be much greater commitment to local sustainability policies and programs than when these groups are excluded.

## **Urban Advocacy Groups, City Governance, and the Pursuit of Sustainability in American Cities**

### **Introduction**

Why do some cities decide to enact and adopt policies and programs aimed at trying to become more sustainable, while other cities do not? Some cities, such as Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Austin, and others have built firm reputations as being places that take sustainability seriously as a matter of public policy. Other cities, perhaps including Oklahoma City, Charlotte, Detroit, Newark, San Antonio, and others have done very little to pursue sustainability. Over the last ten years or so, scholars have made valiant efforts to find compelling explanations for variations in the pursuit of sustainability, perhaps starting with obvious economic and demographic explanations. Recent analyses have come around to the view that these explanations do not take us very far. Cities with similar economics and economic challenges often take very different views about the importance of sustainability. Ultimately, the pursuit of sustainability policies is a political decision, and increasingly, analysis has turned its attention to understanding why some cities develop the “political will” to pursue sustainability while others do not or cannot.

Entertaining the pursuit of sustainability as a matter of political will inevitably opens the door to understanding local policymaking processes, particularly the character of local groups and group advocacy. Does the political landscape look significantly different in cities where the pursuit of sustainability is taken seriously? Are these cities somehow governed differently? Are environmental groups more prevalent or more effective in these cities? Are local policymakers

more open and receptive to pro-sustainability sentiments and advocates in these cities? These are the kinds of questions that animate this paper and the study that underlies it.

### **Sustainability as an Urban Policy Problem**

At its most basic level, sustainability is often defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations 1987). These and other definitions of sustainability do not necessarily call for local governments to intervene, but many cities have embarked on efforts to try to become more sustainable through their local policies and programs. Few people argue that cities offer the entire solution to problems of sustainability, and the importance of cities in addressing sustainability has long been debated (Hempel 2009). To be sure, an individual city may well have political difficulty dealing with the externalities that would need to be addressed to make it somehow truly sustainable (Portney 2005). Yet, as we have argued elsewhere, evidence increasingly points to the important role played by cities as they adopt and implement more and more programs aimed at trying to become more sustainable (Portney and Berry 2010).

Although most U.S. cities would not be considered among the world leaders in the pursuit of local sustainability, by now there are at least 50 major cities with populations of 90,000 or greater that have adopted some form of public sustainability policies. The 50 cities that have sustainability programs vary considerably in terms of how aggressive they are – how many different programs they have adopted and how robust those programs are – but they all share recognition that the pursuit of sustainability is a worthwhile goal (Portney 2002; 2003; 2005). Skeptics might suggest that many of these efforts amount to nothing more than “greenwashing,” where cities go through the motions but never really change the fundamental character of what they do in their policies and programs. Yet the more aggressive cities – the

cities that seem to be taking sustainability more seriously and that have gone way beyond the “low hanging fruit” – have enacted and implemented some very significant and effective programs.

In addition to adopting and implementing specific policies and programs, many cities have made a broad commitment, as a matter of public policy, to try to become more sustainable. This commitment usually takes the form of a resolution by city council, an executive order or proclamation by the mayor or chief executive, or statements in comprehensive policy or planning documents, such as a General Plan or Comprehensive Plan (Saha and Paterson 2008). Moreover, if the focus is specifically on climate change, many more cities have created plans or programs to try to mitigate or adapt to the effects of greenhouse gas emissions, although there appears to be substantial variation in how comprehensive these plans are and how extensively these plans are implemented (Wheeler 2008). Even among cities that have neither official sustainability nor climate change policies, there are many programs and initiatives that have been undertaken in an effort to become more sustainable. “Smart growth” and “green economic development” approaches, brethren to sustainability, have now become fairly common in the landscape of local public policies (O’Connell 2008; 2009; Fitzgerald 2010).

The contemporary challenge for research is to develop a deeper understanding for why some cities elect to aggressively pursue sustainability policies and programs while others do not. Previously analyses hypothesized that these decisions were driven by demographics, city finances, and environmental exigencies. Yet studies that investigate these causes of sustainability policies produce very weak results (Portney and Berry 2010). Most recently, analysis has turned to trying to understand the politics of and governance for local sustainability policies. What kinds of politics – political processes and governance structures – seem best able to make the

pursuit of sustainability policies palatable? To understand the political landscape, our starting point here is an understanding of the world of local interest advocacy.

### **Urban Advocacy**

In our federated system we naturally think of smaller units as microcosms of those at the next higher level. Yet urban interest group systems are not smaller versions of those at the state and national levels. Indeed, they are anything but. Urban advocacy is structured by a very different population of groups, by the strong ties of neighborhood to city government, and by lower barriers to entry for organized interests. These patterns of organization and advocacy influence city governments as they make decisions about environmental protection and sustainability.

Population Contrasts. The most striking characteristic of city-level advocacy is the relative low density of business groups and professional associations. Unlike Washington, where business lobbyists trip over each other as they prowl the halls of Congress, business associations in cities are few in number. Individual corporations in a city may enter the policymaking fray on project-specific matters but tend to avoid more general advocacy. City governments have limited policymaking authority and in comparison to Washington, they do relatively little in the way of significant business regulation (Peterson 1981; Portney 2007). Zoning and land use regulation is an exception to this and the importance of this type of local regulation is reflected in more active business lobbying on both project specific matters and more general regulatory issues involving real estate development. Professional associations are certainly common in cities but they are generally inactive in the local political arena. Although the American Dental Association has a large and active lobbying staff in Washington, the local dental association in Fresno or Wichita,

if there is one, will likely have few reasons to lobby their city council. As a result, such local groups are not organized in a way that easily facilitates political mobilization.

It is no small irony that urbanists and interest group scholars have long placed business at the very center of city politics (De Socio 2007; Molotch 1976). In various theoretical frameworks urban regimes require the resources, expertise, networking capacity, and political muscle of large businesses to undertake the kind of initiatives that mayors and city councilors covet. We don't believe that these previous analyses were wrong. Clarence Stone's incisive study of Atlanta, for example, is compelling and convincing evidence that city hall depended on business and civic leaders to move the city forward (Stone 1989; 1993). That role still exists, but there aren't as many formidable corporate actors to fill it as before. The political economy of cities has undergone a fundamental change (Portney 2007).

In recent years a combination of mergers, acquisitions, and globalization has depleted central cities of many of their large corporations, some of which were instrumental in promoting the economic growth of those same cities. The dynamics of a market economy lead to the withering decline or outright death of particular businesses while new industries emerge. However, new industries such as high tech and biotech have no particular reason to locate in a central city as opposed to suburban settings. Our perspective is colored by research on Boston and other cities in Massachusetts. For many years Boston mayors leaned on the "Vault," a group of 20 or so business leaders who were the backbone of the city regime. The Vault was instrumental in developing the vision and strategy of the city's economic revival and provided some of the resources to bring it to fruition. Perhaps the most important members of the Vault were six large banks headquartered in Boston. Not one of those banks still exists—all were swallowed up in mergers in acquisitions by firms headquartered elsewhere. Today the local

affiliates of these mega-banks are not politically active in the city. Indeed, the few large companies such as Fidelity and State Street that remain headquartered in Boston demonstrate little interest in city affairs (Berry, Portney, Liss, Simoncelli, and Berger 2006). Developers in Boston are dependent on the mayor, not the other way around. Boston is certainly not unique in this respect.

Population figures for advocacy groups active in five Massachusetts cities also demonstrate the dimensions of these changes.<sup>1</sup> In the course of interviewing city councilors, administrators, and advocacy leaders, we asked about interest group activity relating to the specific issues being discussed. This method offers the concreteness of identifying groups that are participating and bypasses assumptions about what kinds of groups should be active on what kinds of issues. The aggregate figures show that among all groups active, business constituted 17.6 percent of the population. Labor unions were 5.9 percent of active groups. The remaining 83.5 percent of groups were neighborhood associations, citywide citizen groups, and various other kinds of nonprofits (Berry, Portney, Liss, Simoncelli, and Berger 2006). The number of groups of each type cannot be equated with proportions of influence. Nevertheless, these figures do tell us something about the advocacy environment that surrounds policymakers.

Politics of Place. To understand interest group politics in cities is to understand the politics of place. Most urban advocacy springs from proposals or complaints about a condition or problem in a specific place where people live. The vast majority of schools are tied to enrollments from a particular neighborhood. Many businesses have neighborhood identities and at various times may find themselves contending with changing demographics, active neighborhood associations, or zoning restrictions blocking expansion. Local businesses thus have

a high incentive to develop strong relations with community groups and neighborhood associations.

Neighborhoods vary in the degree to which a sense of community contributes to ease of mobilization when issues arise. Concerns among rank-and-file residents may arise from threats to the integrity of the neighborhood in the form of proposals for zoning variances or licenses for new businesses, projected closings of facilities, reductions in city services, proposals for low income housing, or the emergence of environmental problems. Mobilization can also be stimulated by more positive developments, such as allocations of city funds for projects, proposals for new amenities such as bike paths, pocket parks, or swimming pools, or competitions for new facilities to be allocated in select neighborhoods. Mobilization can be aided by the small size of the catchment area; a friends-and-neighbors social network helps neighborhood groups contend with the collective action problem. As John Dryzek notes, “The smaller a group, the easier it is for individuals to identify with it as a community” (1987, 224-5). In sum, there is no shortage of reasons for neighborhoods to be organized. As we’ll argue below, even though the level of organization may be modest, it does not take a great deal of neighborhood level mobilization to elicit attention from city hall.

The politics of place manifested in neighborhoods reflects in part the way city councils are elected. Typically all or part of the membership of city councils must win their seats from districts. A remarkably high 52 percent of the city councilors who responded to the survey we conducted over the last year (discussed in detail below) indicate that they had served as an officer in a neighborhood association prior to their election to the council. Presumably more councilors were active in their neighborhood association but didn’t serve as an officer. Whatever the aggregate figure, it’s clear that activism on behalf of the neighborhood is a means of establishing

credibility and visibility for a subsequent city council race. As an ongoing relationship, a councilor's tie to her neighborhood is a strong bond of community and is constantly nurtured (Fenno 1978). On the other side of this relationship, neighborhood groups (despite their presumed nonprofit status) can be enormously helpful to candidates by providing access to followers and forums for appearances. Moreover, such groups can informally communicate to friends and neighbors who their "friends" are at city hall (Marwell 2004).

There are also plenty of reasons to believe that neighborhood groups are weak in city politics. They lack professional staffs and have few resources aside from volunteer enthusiasm. Many urbanists have found them to be weaklings when faced with business in a conflict (Stone 1989). Yet the literature is not of one mind. Collaborative policymaking between neighborhoods, developers, and city officials has been shown to be an effective path to "getting to yes." More on this below.

Low Barriers to Entry. Urban advocacy differs sharply from the national interest group system in another important way. Urban groups face decidedly low barriers to entry. We use this term in two ways. First, the barrier to entry in terms of overcoming obstacles to organizing a group are low—particularly low for citywide citizen groups and neighborhood associations. Second, as our data in the next section demonstrates, it is relatively easy for groups of all types to penetrate the policymaking system and to participate within it.

Scholars have looked at the process of organizing voluntary associations as one in which resources must be aggregated and then strategically deployed to attract members and donors (Salisbury 1969; Walker 1991). On the national level mobilization is seen as highly competitive as groups with overlapping constituencies try to attract members and donors. Some organizations may not face this problem as "membership" may be irrelevant (corporations) or essentially

compulsory (labor unions, some professional associations). For national citizen groups and many trade groups, organizational maintenance can be challenging and consume a large share of resources. As noted above most citizen groups and all neighborhood associations active at the community level are run by volunteers. Moreover, they operate out of people's home or business and the overhead costs are insignificant. With no office and staff on "K" Street to support, the organizational maintenance problems are more on the order of getting people to carry out advocacy work (Miller 2007). Institutions on the local level, especially large nonprofits like hospitals and universities, easily overcome the collective action problem as they can draw on existing organizational resources instead of having to mobilize members and solicit donations (Salisbury 1984). Corporations at the local level have the same advantages of already being organized and possessing significant resources.

The flip side of this ease of organizing for citizen groups and neighborhood associations is the lack of professionalism. As volunteers they likely have lower levels of experience and expertise than advocates from business or nonprofit institutions. This may be a real disadvantage when neighborhood associations confront developers over a proposed project.

The barriers to entry into the policymaking process are also low. Again, this openness of urban systems stands in stark contrast to Washington where interest groups swarm and policymakers must maintain strong barriers to entry lest they be overwhelmed by the large number of groups that want to influence them. Federal bureaucracies as well as the Congress are information rich and employ substantial staffs of policy experts. Local governments are lean, if not emaciated, and the current economic climate has made things worse for urban bureaucracies. City bureaucrats and councilors can find the information provided by advocacy groups to be important supplements to what they know about a problem or project. In the case of social

service providers, local officials are typically dependent on those nonprofits to provide them with information about how programs are working. More than likely the local (and possibly state) bureaucrats have no means of overseeing the programs for which they have provided funding (Berry and Arons 2003).

Beyond this need for information is a stronger norm of inclusiveness that exists at the national or even state level. It is hard to tell neighborhood groups that they shouldn't be intimately involved in decisions such as siting, zoning, and licensing that can directly affect the quality of life in that geographic area. Coupled with norms are numerous citizen participation requirements. Such requirements empower neighborhood groups and are an incentive to both policymakers and private sector groups to create a process for negotiation (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993; Fung 2004).

### **Advocacy for Local Sustainability**

The changing population of urban interest groups, the neighborhood basis of city politics, and the low barriers to entry for groups led us to believe that the nature of advocacy in the contemporary city would provide a useful path to understanding the development of sustainability. Adopting a robust sustainability effort is no small decision by a city government. Sustainability takes resources and any allocation of scarce resources involves tradeoffs. Although it may be city policymakers who take the initiative regarding sustainability, it is surely the case that they work in concert with advocacy groups. In bumper sticker language, "sustainability doesn't just happen." What is less clear is how it happens. The precise role that advocacy groups play in policymaking on sustainability has not been established.

In this investigation of advocacy we look closely at nonprofits as it is our expectation that cities' pursuit of sustainability is correlated with a robust nonprofit sector. Analytically we

separate nonprofits into three categories: environmental groups, neighborhood associations, and other nonprofits generally (those that don't fall into the other two categories). With the apparent proliferation of local nonprofit organizations promoting activities and actions on the environment, climate change, and sustainability, perhaps cities are experiencing the evolution of a new type of local governance regime. There is certainly circumstantial evidence that cities with more robust nonprofit sectors demonstrate a greater likelihood of being willing to pursue sustainability as a matter of public policy (Portney and Cuttler 2010; O'Connell 2009; Lubell, Feiock, and de la Cruz 2009). What of other parts of the interest group community—is there a relationship between the level of sustainability and the strength of other sectors? Does a strong business sector portend a weak commitment to sustainability? Or is the association a positive one reflecting the increasing tendency of the local business community to commandeer sustainability programs to promote economic development?

Questions about the link between cities' governance and their pursuit of sustainability, smart growth, and climate protection have received significant recent attention by scholars. For example, analysis by Lubell, Feiock, and de la Cruz (2009) links the formal structure of city governance institutions in Florida, especially city councils, to the kind of urban growth policies cities adopt. Another line of inquiry has focused on the broad character of local governance coalitions and their link to sustainability and climate change policies. As Gibbs and Jonas (2000: 300) note, "local environmental initiatives these days involve a wide range of local organizations, including local governments, business organizations, environmental groups, community organizations, and other local 'stakeholders'." Other governance characteristics, such as levels and types of public participation (discussed below) have also been suggested as

important influences on local willingness to take on sustainability and environmental protection as a matter of public policy.

Case study research suggests nonprofit groups spearheaded the effort that in cities that were early out of the gate in pursuing sustainability. In Seattle, for example, a city that started its pursuit of sustainability as a matter of public policy by the early 1990s, the nonprofit group “Sustainable Seattle” played an important if not pivotal role through its efforts to crystallize a public voice around its “sustainable indicators” initiative. Eventually that effort was incorporated into the city’s comprehensive plan, “Toward a Sustainable Seattle.” In a pilot study in 2006, Portney and Cuttler (2010) studied 14 U.S. cities with populations between, 400,000 and 650,000. This study involved a survey of city councilors and city administrators to find out how much contact city officials had with the nonprofit community. What they found was a strong tendency for cities with more aggressive sustainability programs to have local officials who interacted far more with nonprofit groups. The nonprofit sector in cities with more aggressive sustainability efforts seems better developed, especially with regard to how frequently policymakers interact with the sector and how active those pro-sustainability advocacy groups are. There is also a greater likelihood that the nonprofit sector will include at least one homegrown group that supports and advocates for sustainability or for the environment in some fashion. And when such groups exist in cities, there is a strong tendency for traditional, unabashedly pro-economic development views to be challenged by a more ecologically or environmentally constrained view of economic development.

Many arguments have been put forth to support the idea that widespread participation of the residents of communities represents an important, even essential, element in the successful pursuit of sustainability (Portney and Berry 2010; Weber 2003; Baber and Bartlett 2005;

Costanza, Daly, and Prugh 2000). Yet there is much less discussion of the ways that mediating organizations, especially those organizations that might be said to produce “bridging social capital” between residents and their local government leaders, can and do operate in the broader context of the local political process. How do mediating institutions aggregate and articulate to policymakers the collective voices of many residents who share an interest in sustainability?

Finally, another line of inquiry examines the need for multi-level governance specifically in pursuit of climate protection. (Betsill and Rabe 2009; Betsill and Bulkeley 2006; Bulkeley and Betsill 2003; Rabe 2008). Feiock, Tavares and Kang (2007) suggest that the mere presence of multi-level governance arrangements dedicated to growth management exercises great influence over municipalities’ willingness to engage in smart growth policies. Of course, the underlying idea is that no single government, especially municipal government, has the authority, capacity, or political will to affect emissions of greenhouse gases or other environmental impacts. In order to make significant reductions, efforts of state, regional, and local planning and policies are required. In the absence of such multi-level governance, municipalities will inevitably find their own sustainability policies overwhelmed by polluting behavior of people and places over which they have no ability change. Such externalities require policy and planning at higher levels, so the argument goes.

### **Survey Methods**

The data on which this analysis is based come from a 2009 survey of local officials in 50 of the largest 54 cities in the U.S. The four largest cities, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston, were excluded from the survey because the challenges presented by their scale. The 50 surveyed cities have 2007 population sizes ranging from 1.5 million in Phoenix to 336,000 in Tampa. In other words, these cities represent the entire universe of U.S. cities in this population

range. Between June and August of 2009, questionnaires were mailed to all city councilors or commissioners, and a specific subset of city administrators, in these cities. The project also involved surveying a large number of representatives from advocacy and nonprofit organizations, but these results are not yet available for analysis. Overall, questionnaires were mailed to the entire population of 541 councilors,<sup>2</sup> and 190 responded, for a response rate of 35.1%.<sup>3</sup> The project also involved identifying and surveying an average of about 18 city administrators in each city. The administrators we targeted were all leading officials at the heads of departments or bureaus with some relevance to environmental affairs and economic development. Titles of such offices and the organization of responsibilities differed from city to city. Generally, though, we identified those in areas such as environmental protection, sustainability, public works, parks and recreation, public utilities, water and wastewater management, office of the city manager, economic development, and planning. Questionnaires were mailed to the entire population of 885 city administrators, and 413 responded for a response rate of 46.7%.<sup>4</sup>

This project developed a mixed-mode survey methodology. City councilors' and administrators' mailing and email addresses were collected from each city's respective web sites. Councilors and administrators were mailed a paper questionnaire, along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey, and offering respondents the opportunity to win one of three \$100 gift cards from Amazon.com. Also included were a pre-paid (stamped) postcard allowing the councilor or administrator to provide his/her name and to be entered into the gift card raffle, and a pre-paid (stamped) envelope to allow respondents to return the completed questionnaire in the mail. This mailing also included a new \$1 bill, which Dillman, Smyth and Christian (2009, 238-242) suggest exerts significant influence on the response rate. The initial

mailing offered prospective respondents the option of doing the survey on the web, providing a URL for the web-based version of the questionnaire. After about 17 business days, those who had not returned the pre-paid postcard were sent a personalized email reminder which included a link to the online questionnaire. The survey of councilors yielded 141 responses on paper and 49 responses online,<sup>5</sup> and the survey of administrators yielded 246 responses on paper and 167 online.

### **Key Questions and Issues**

With three different surveys and more than 1,100 respondents, our data cup runneth over. This is the first of a series of papers to explore urban government, politics, and sustainability and here we focus on three central questions. We'll first examine barriers to entry and the level of inclusiveness that city policymakers offer to different interest group sectors of the city. Second, we'll turn to a more fine-grained comparison of policymakers' attitudes toward different sectors of the advocacy community. The third question takes the analysis a step further by exploring how collaborative policymaking among groups and policymakers might be linked to support for environmental protection and to a commitment to sustainability.

This is an ambitious agenda for one conference paper but we should note that further future analysis will be complemented by two additional sources of data. As noted above, although the survey of advocacy groups has been completed, it is not yet ready for the kind of statistical work we can apply to the city councilor and administrator data sets. Another database in progress is a comprehensive evaluation of each of the 50 cities' programming (or lack thereof) along 36 different dimensions of sustainability policy. Nevertheless, we have amassed a considerable amount of data and believe we have uncovered some important and interesting patterns relating to variations in city policymaking.

Access. The concern with barriers to entry for urban advocacy organizations builds on a long debate in political science about equality and bias in interest group systems. The distinctive populations found in city level interest group systems and that found in Washington does not, in and of itself, demonstrate that there are different patterns of influence. Even though business is represented by a smaller proportion of advocacy organizations within the population of lobbies in a city, it may still be just as powerful as it is in national politics. Cities badly need job creation and officials may be especially responsive to trade associations like the local Chamber of Commerce or to individual real estate developers. A long line of scholarly argument holds that the very essence of a market-based economy means that business interests have a structural advantage, what Lindblom famously called a “privileged position” (1977). In practical terms this would mean that the door is always open to business lobbies at city hall—wide open.

The first step in the process of trying to link advocacy in policy is to determine the level of the relationship between policymakers and representatives of advocacy groups. Influence doesn't emerge by osmosis; there must be some mechanism that generates influence. At the most elemental level, meeting with legislators and administrators is a critical stage in the process by which an organization's interests are communicated to those who are in a position to affect policy.

The research on lobbying is based largely on what has been learned in Washington. What is clear from that literature is that access to policymakers is a limited and highly valued resource. Access to legislators and administrators is restricted because they cannot possibly spend the time it would take to meet with representatives of all the groups that want to lobby them. Indeed, it is the job of staffers to determine who gets to see the policymaker, who must make do with seeing a staffer, and who is to be politely ignored. For a large number of lobbies simply getting

someone to take notice is a challenge. A high proportion of all Washington lobbying activity is directed at trying to push an issue onto the agenda of a committee or agency docket, a difficult task given a highly dense and competitive environment full of other groups trying to accomplish the same thing (Salisbury 1990; Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, and Leech 2009).

The literature on Washington lobbying is also clear that business is at the head of the class when it comes to access. The population of business lobbies dwarfs other sectors so most of those knocking at the door are corporate or trade representatives. Indeed, they are fully half of all lobbies (Schlozman 2010, 433). It's also clear that business has advantages when it knocks on the door. PAC donations, which come disproportionately from business, have been shown to be linked to access and to mobilizing individual legislators (Wright 1990; Hall 1990). Access can be highly contingent, with ideological soul mates in government much more available to the groups they agree with. Still, business access endures no matter what party controls Congress and the White House (Peterson and Walker 1986; Peterson 1992).

This description of the position of business lobbies in Washington hardly comes as a great revelation. Unfortunately, it has been common to generalize from what we know about Washington lobbies to state and local political systems (Berry 2010). Unfortunately, we do not have a replication of our research on the national level and cannot make direct statistical comparisons. Nevertheless, synthesizing what is known from the abundant literature on lobbying at the national level provides a sufficiently clear contrast to the 50 city data presented here.

The baseline question utilized here asked administrators,

“In the course of doing your job, you come into contact with representatives of many different kinds of governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Thinking back over the past year or so, how frequently have you had contact with each? By “contact” we mean telephone calls, meetings in your office, and meetings out in the community or in workplaces.”

For each of interest group sector respondents were asked to check one of the following, “weekly,” “monthly,” “annually,” or “never.” In the interest group world at any level, seeing policymakers at least once a month is an unambiguous indicator of an ongoing relationship. The survey question for administrators thus distinguishes between ongoing contact and episodic or nonexistent contact, although the question for city councilors was not as clear-cut. The aggregate percentages in Figure 1, showing the percent of city administrators who reported contact with each type of group at least once a month are the sum of responses for weekly and monthly meetings.<sup>6</sup>

[Figure 1 Here]

Three strong findings are readily apparent. First, similar to national politics, business has easy and frequent access to city administrators. Fully three-quarters of respondents indicate that they have a high level of interaction with both business groups and individual corporations. Although hardly surprising these aggregate scores confirm that the influence of business is reflected in the same day-in, day-out lobbying that all kinds of interest groups do. The image of business as a vital part of a mayor’s coalition, with his or her ear always available, is not necessarily inaccurate. At the same time business influence is clearly dependent on far more than being part of a mayor’s regime. It needs to work harmoniously with other parts of government and cross-sectional coalitions with other advocacy sectors are usually beneficial too.

Second, it is not only business that has easy access to policymakers. What is perhaps most interesting in these data is that neighborhood associations (73.3 percent) have access to administrators that is equivalent to that of business. At first glance this seems surprising because neighborhood associations are usually tiny volunteer organizations with few resources other than the time of activists who donate a few hours here and there. Perhaps there is a strong norm that

when the representatives of a neighborhood ask to meet with planners and other administrators over what is going on in that area of the city, it behooves agency officials to talk with them. As noted earlier in the paper, local politics is largely the politics of place and administrators anticipate that proposals and problems affecting neighborhoods must be dealt with in a fashion that incorporates neighborhood participation. They surely fear mobilization of residents by the neighborhood association as even a small imbroglio can bring on the wrath of the area's city councilor.

As indicated above, two other types of nonprofits were also included in the list given to survey subjects.<sup>7</sup> "Nonprofits other than environmental" may not be the most graceful label but it clearly instructs respondents to separate out the kind of social service agencies, arts organizations, and recreational groups that we usually think of under the rubric of "nonprofit." Given the focus of this study on sustainability, it was important to single out environmental groups, for which we had a separate category. Two-thirds of administrators indicate a high rate of interaction with representatives of the non-environmental nonprofits. Previous research has shown that half of all nonprofits that are large enough to file an informational tax return (\$25,000 and above in annual income), are health or human service providers. Since these organizations carry out government programs, there is every reason to expect ongoing interaction between their leaders and government officials (Berry and Arons 2003).

The third finding of interest involves labor unions and environmental organizations. Environmental groups have a lower rate of interaction, with 50.8 percent of city officials answering that they met with one or more of these organizations on a weekly or monthly frequency. This is certainly often enough for environmental groups to communicate ongoing interests but it is a significantly lower rate of interaction than that of business or neighborhood

associations. We can't explain this lower rate as a function of these groups being voluntary organizations with no professional lobbyists and little in the way of resources as that description also fits neighborhood associations. Labor unions score the lowest (29.0 percent) of the six interest group sectors. Local unions are certainly preoccupied with contracts and renewals, which are obviously periodic. It can't be determined from the surveys how much labor advocacy relates to contracts as opposed to other issues.

In the context of sustainability policy it is particularly noteworthy that environmental and labor groups score at the lower end of this interaction frequency rating. In separate and preliminary analyses we conducted on the six interest group sectors (not shown here), environmental groups and labor unions displayed the strongest support for sustainable initiatives. The support by environmental groups is obvious but strong labor union backing for environmental policies may be less than intuitive. After all, environmental groups and unions sometimes clash over economic development proposals. Despite such occasional disagreement, labor surely recognizes that many sustainability initiatives involve building, repairing, or retrofitting, all of which create jobs. What has not been determined is whether these lower interaction scores for these two sectors reflect a preference of policymakers to avoid lobbyists pushing sustainable policies, or if the interaction that does take place includes a healthy dose of lobbying on sustainability.

The Value of Information. The presumption underlying interaction between advocates and policymakers is that both sides receive some benefit from such meetings. The value to advocates is not so much to tell officials where their group stands. Officials usually know where a group stands on an issue before they meet. Instead, advocates know that they need to present something more than their own convictions and opinions to influence those across the table from

themselves. In exchange they pick up information from policymakers as to next steps, what's feasible, who else they should see, and how supportive that official is. The policymaker might obtain some political information as to how advocacy is developing. Depending on the group, she may also receive some policy-related information or data that enhances her understanding of an issue. Ideally, such information would be concise, accurate, and pertinent to the specific situation at hand. A contrary hypothesis is that policymakers agree to meet with certain groups only to appear to be responsive and accessible. For such groups the policymaker might assume that the information they are to receive is unreliable or hopelessly biased.

This information exchange model has been at the very foundation of interest group research and theory since political scientists began conducting empirical studies of the lobbying process. Lester Milbrath's *The Washington Lobbyists* (1963) is centered around information flow. Heinz et al's *The Hollow Core* (1993), a massive study of Washington lobbying, argues that gathering and exchanging information is fundamentally what lobbyists do, hour by hour, day by day. More recently Baumgartner and his colleagues (2009) analyze national lobbying by examining the arguments incorporated in communications to policymakers.

Here again the differences between national and local advocacy stand in sharp relief. In Washington a well-deserved stereotype of the interaction between lobbyists and policymakers is one in which the lobbyist brings a formal study with him that he then hands to the staffer, legislator, or administrator. The study may have been done by a think tank, consulting firm, academic, or in-house by others working at the interest group. The study itself is often the excuse for a follow-up visit. But original research is costly and what is affordable to a national group is likely prohibitive to a city-level organization.

All groups strive not simply to meet with policymakers, but to establish their “facts” as the foundation for city policymaking. To gain some sense of how different sectors are valued by policymakers, we included this question on the questionnaires for both city councilors and administrators:

[for each sector] “how would you evaluate the quality of information they bring to your attention? For example, when they make a pitch for their position or hand you a memo or a study, just how reliable is their information?”

For each of the six interest group sector respondents circled a number on a five point scale, the higher the number the higher the reliability of the information.

Producing valued research would seem to be especially problematic for neighborhood associations, which tend to have the scantest of a financial base and research capacity. Local environmental organizations, which are generally all volunteer or almost all volunteer organizations, would also seem to be disadvantaged. Conversely, business associations, individual corporations, and labor unions, would appear to have some advantage as they have either dues paying members or an institutional basis of support. Comparing interest group sectors sheds some light on these conjectures. In Figure 2 the bars each represent the mean of all the respondents’ evaluations, with separate scores for administrators and city councilors. Overall, the scores reflect officials’ favorable views of the reliability of group research as none falls below the midpoint (2.5) on the scale. As expected, business associations and individual corporations do relatively well. Despite its relatively ample resources, labor finishes dead last in both the city councilor and administrator surveys. Unions may not invest in any quality research, though alternatively this relatively low figure may simply represent ideological antagonism by policymakers.

[Figure 2 Here]

The idea that financial resources are necessary to produce reliable information is belied by the results for neighborhood associations. In both surveys neighborhood associations do well, falling only nominally below those at the top of ratings. It may be that the real key to neighborhood association lobbying is the validity of neighborhood-based observations. As argued above, the politics of place is at the core of city policymaking. The experiential nature of the arguments that neighborhood activists put forth would be inconsequential before the staff policy wonks at a federal agency. At the city level it is likely very different as the concerns put forward by activists may be taken at face value as reflective of neighborhood opinion. In contrast to their score on the contact scale, environmental groups rate highly here too.

One noticeable pattern is that the evaluations by city councilors are, across the board, higher than the evaluations of administrators. This may reflect the heightened political antennae of city councilors, who are less concerned about the scientific validity of arguments and more about what residents in their districts believe. For their part administrators might follow stronger professional norms relating to the need for a more scientific, evidentiary basis for decision making. If so, they would likely place less value on experiential-based arguments presented to them.

Collaborative Policymaking. The findings so far set an intriguing stage for trying to determine how interaction between groups and officials may lead to substantive differences in the way decisions concerning the environment are made. In the previous section the possibility was raised that meetings themselves could be symbolic as policymakers might want to give the impression of being collaborative without actually wanting to give up the autonomy to make policy decisions themselves and without what they might regard as interference from advocacy

organizations. Can we, in fact, link meetings and the exchange of information to an impact on policymaking?

From an interest group's point of view, the goal is collaborative policymaking. More than meeting with an official to make a case for a particular policy objective, groups want to be at the bargaining table as issues are hashed out. They want to be on committees combined with stakeholders and policymakers. They want to be consulted, called in to review a proposal before it is made public. In a variety of ways they often want to *partner* with city government in policymaking and in the provision or co-production of public services (Marwell 2004).

To better gauge a propensity toward collaborative policymaking, survey respondents were asked:

Which of these sectors are most likely to be included in informal bargaining and negotiation with city officials? On issues involving both economic development and environmental concerns, what is the likelihood that you and your colleagues would include these sectors in your policymaking deliberations?

Administrators and councilors were given four choices for each interest group sector: "Very Likely to Include," "Maybe/Maybe Not," "Not Very Likely to Include," and "Don't Know."<sup>8</sup>

The central question is whether inclusion in deliberations is correlated with policy decisions that reflect commitment to the environment and sustainability. In short, is there likely to be greater commitment to the environment and to sustainability when some types of groups are included in deliberations? There are many ways that commitment to the environment and to sustainability can be measured. Here, we focus on answers to two specific questions as measures of our dependent variables. First, we asked respondents to report on commitment to environmental protection:

Cities also vary considerably in their commitment to environmental protection. In your own estimation, on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating a strong commitment to environmental protection and 1 indicating virtually no commitment to environmental

protection, how would you evaluate your local government's commitment to improving the natural environment of the city?

Second, we asked:

We want to turn to another question about the environment, specifically sustainability and your city's level of commitment to balancing environmental degradation with environmental protection and improvement. Advocates of sustainability argue that we should meet the development needs of today's cities without compromising the needs of future generations. Thinking about all the policies, programs, and initiatives of city government, how committed would you say your city is to this idea of sustainability?

Of course, there is no way to guarantee that respondents who reported "very high" or "high" commitment to the environment or to sustainability are in cities that in fact exhibit high commitment. Future analysis will examine the relationship between these perceptions of commitment and actual policies and programs. We are encouraged by discovering that 100% of councilors in 18 of the 50 cities reported that their commitment to sustainability was high or very high, and that all 18 of these cities have official sustainability policies. For now, however, we simply wish to know whether there seems to be a connection between the perception of substantial commitment to the environment and sustainability and the propensity for specific groups to be included in policy deliberations.

The responses to questions about likelihood of inclusion for each type of group were crosstabulated with answers to questions about commitment to the environment (Table 1) and commitment to sustainability (Table 2). In the first row of Table 1, for example, among city councilors who report that business associations are not likely to be included in deliberations, 40.0% said that their respective city's commitment to the environment is high or very high. These tables also report the results of a  $\chi^2$  significance test and provide bivariate correlations. If either the  $\chi^2$  test or the correlation is statistically significant, the type of group is shown in bold type.

[Table 1 and Table 2 here]

The findings are revealing. When city councilors reported that **business groups** were “very likely to be included,” 61.9% of them reported that their city’s commitment to the environment was “high” or “very high.” Contrast this with the results when **environmental groups** were very likely included, where 74.1% of councilors reported high or very high commitment to environmental protection. On the other hand, when city councilors reported that environmental groups were “not likely to be included,” only 43.3% reported that their city’s commitment to the environment was high or very high. In the lower portion of Table 1, the same pattern emerges for city administrators. When city administrators reported that environmental groups were very likely to be included, 78.5% reported high or very high commitment to the environment. When administrators reported that environmental groups were not likely to be included, only 43.8% reported high or very high commitment to the environment. Inclusion of environmental groups seems to make a difference. Thus, when environmental groups are included in deliberations, commitment to the environment appears much stronger.

As described earlier, groups of all shapes and sizes seem to enjoy relative ease of contacting their public officials. But does this translate, in any way, into public policy? As before, our approach here, focusing on environmental and sustainability issues, relies on city officials’ reports of commitment to the environmental protection and to sustainability policies. Are cities more committed to environmental protection and sustainability when environmental groups are frequently **in contact** with their public officials? What about other kinds of groups? Is there any relationship between contacting and sustainability commitment when other groups are in frequent contact with their officials? Tables 3 and 4 address this set of questions.

[Table 3 and Table 4 here]

Table 3 shows, for city councilors and administrators, the percent of respondents who reported high or very high commitment to the environment, by frequency of contact with specific groups. Fifty-four percent of city councilors who reported being in contact with business associations less than once a month reported high or very high commitment to the environment, while over 72% in contact with business associations once a month or more reported high or very high commitment to the environment. Although contact with environmental groups, as well as business associations and other nonprofit organizations is slightly associated with greater commitment to the environment, only the former produces a pattern that approaches being statistically significant. For administrators, however, the patterns are clear. When administrators are in contact with environmental groups and labor unions, commitment to the environment is significantly stronger.

Table 4, with a focus on commitment to sustainability, reveals almost an identical set of patterns as those in Table 3. **Contacting city councilors** is not associated with greater commitment to the environment or to sustainability for any group sector. When environmental groups, labor organizations, and neighborhood associations **contact administrators**, however, there seems to be significantly greater commitment to sustainability.

## **Conclusions**

Policymaking in cities, especially policymaking related to protection of the environment and the pursuit of sustainability, can be complicated and daunting. Cities can be as different as night and day in terms of the kinds of policies they choose to pursue and how they choose to pursue them. As different as the largest cities in the U.S. are, some patterns seem clear from this analysis. First, especially compared to Washington politics, city politics are relatively open and ease of access to policymaker is the rule rather than the exception. Second, although groups that

seem to be most supportive of the pursuit of sustainability do not enjoy quite the ease of access to policymakers as do business associations and leaders, access is still quite high. There is no evidence to suggest that any particular type of group stands in strong opposition to environmental and sustainability commitment. The low barriers to entry to policymaking suggest that the challenge for supporters of sustainability is to get organized and to make sure that pro-sustainability organizations get involved in advocating to their public officials.

Third, according to reports of public officials, when local environmental groups get involved in city policymaking processes there is greater commitment to environmental protection and sustainability policies. When pro-sustainability groups contact and build a relationship with their local administrative officials there is a strong commitment to sustainability. When such groups are included in deliberations over policies and programs, city councilors and administrators report greater commitment to sustainability.

The analysis reported here does not look at the connection between group activities and actual policies and programs. Instead, it establishes the connection between group activities and the perception of commitment to the environment and to sustainability. This analysis also does not investigate the internal characteristics or dynamics of different types of groups. Instead, it focuses on extent to which public officials reported group contacting behavior and inclusion of groups in policy deliberations. Investigation of sustainability policies and policymaking, as well as group dynamics, represent challenges to be addressed in future analyses of our surveys of city councilors, city administrators, and group leaders.

Figure 1: Contacts with City Administrators, by Type of Contacting Group

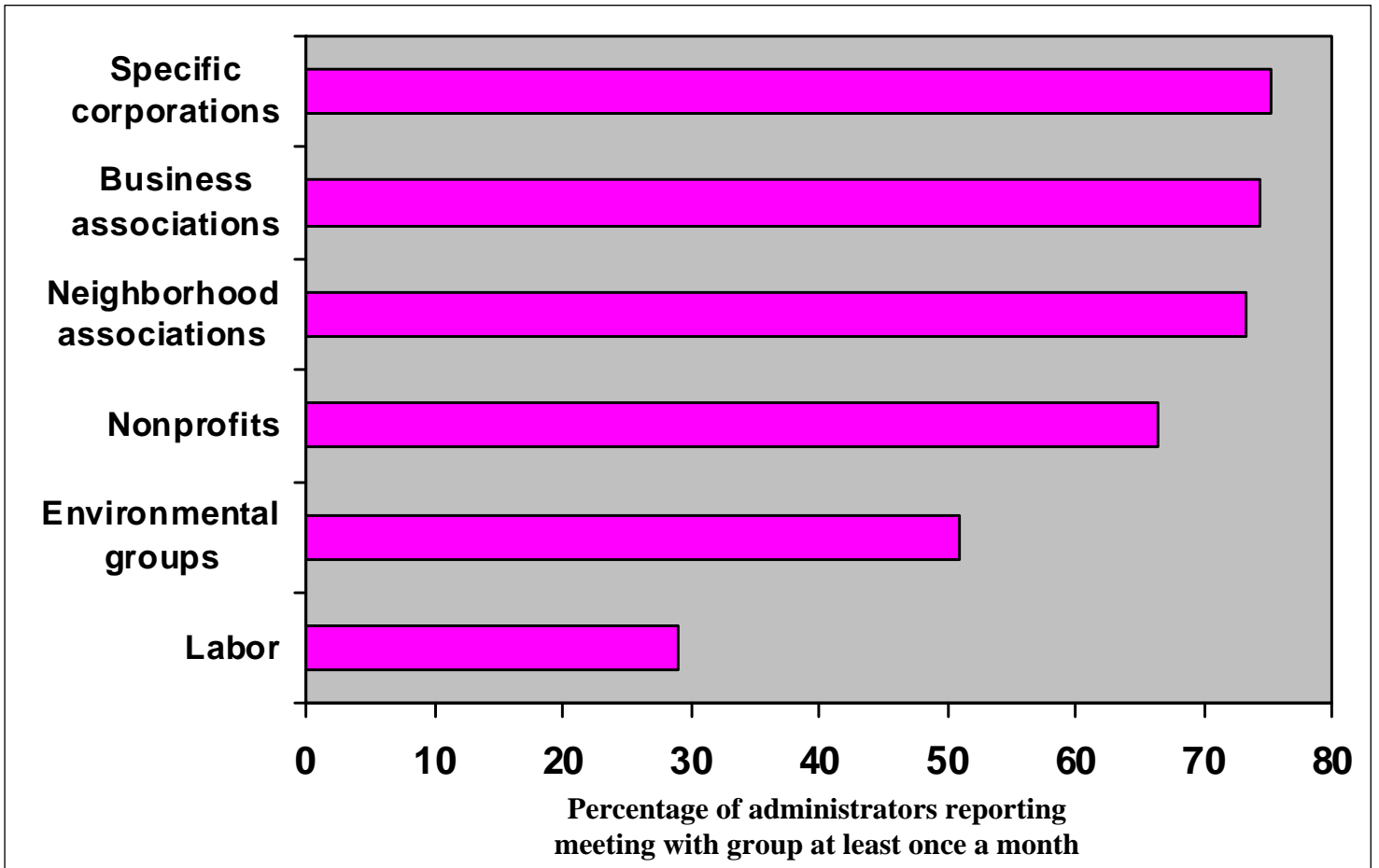


Figure 2: Average Reliability of Information, by Type of Group

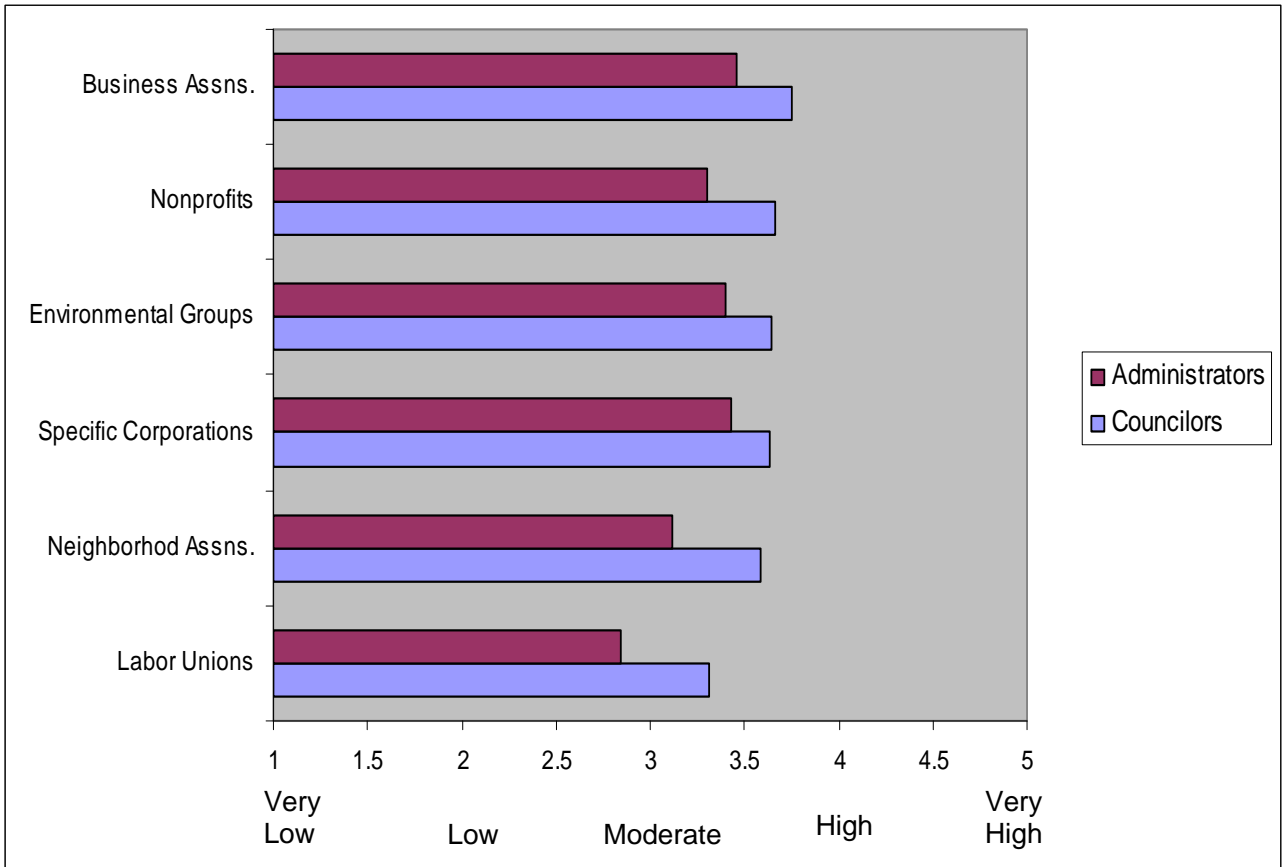


Table 1: Likelihood of Being Included in Deliberations, by Type of Group

Percent reporting “High” or “Very High” *Commitment to the Environment* in the city

City Councilors; n=189

Type of group	Likelihood of group being included in deliberations			Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
	Not likely to include	Maybe/maybe not included	Very likely to include		
Business associations	40.0	56.5	61.9	.149	.026 (.725)
Specific companies	68.8	61.6	53.4	.490	-.118 (.121)
Nonprofits other than environmental	56.0	59.3	62.9	.881	.060 (.426)
<b>Environmental groups</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>48.5</b>	<b>74.1</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.326 (.000)</b>
<b>Labor unions</b>	<b>48.6</b>	<b>66.1</b>	<b>57.8</b>	<b>.012</b>	<b>.127 (.090)</b>
<b>Neighborhood associations</b>	<b>50.0</b>	<b>50.9</b>	<b>65.3</b>	<b>.321</b>	<b>.151 (.045)</b>

City Administrators; n=384

Type of group	Likelihood of group being included in deliberations			Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
	Not likely to include	Maybe/maybe not included	Very likely to include		
<b>Business associations</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>78.0</b>	<b>68.8</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>.012 (.817)</b>
Specific companies	75.5	68.0	69.1	.666	-.024 (.648)
Nonprofits other than environmental	61.4	68.2	75.4	.154	.066 (.199)
<b>Environmental groups</b>	<b>43.8</b>	<b>66.3</b>	<b>78.5</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>.200 (.000)</b>
<b>Labor unions</b>	<b>65.1</b>	<b>67.3</b>	<b>76.0</b>	<b>.097</b>	<b>.128 (.018)</b>
Neighborhood associations	63.6	62.5	73.5	.253	.086 (.094)

Table 2: Likelihood of Being Included in Deliberations, by Type of Group

Percent reporting “High” or “Very High” *Commitment to Sustainability* in the city

City Councilors; n=189

Type of group	Likelihood of group being included in deliberations			Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
	Not likely to include	Maybe/maybe not included	Very likely to include		
Business associations	50.0	65.2	66.7	.807	.038 (.595)
Specific companies	68.8	65.1	64.4	.537	-.070 (.354)
<b>Nonprofits other than environmental</b>	<b>56.0</b>	<b>60.4</b>	<b>77.4</b>	<b>.119</b>	<b>.160 (.016)</b>
<b>Environmental groups</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>63.2</b>	<b>75.3</b>	<b>.004</b>	<b>.230 (.001)</b>
Labor unions	45.9	72.9	67.5	.098	.127 (.091)
Neighborhood associations	55.6	56.1	72.3	.263	.129 (.089)

City Administrators; n=384

Type of group	Likelihood of group being included in deliberations			Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
	Not likely to include	Maybe/maybe not included	Very likely to include		
Business associations	72.7	78.0	67.5	.375	-.082 (.111)
Specific companies	78.6	71.4	66.7	.515	-.069 (.183)
Nonprofits other than environmental	65.9	67.9	76.2	.239	.071 (.169)
<b>Environmental groups</b>	<b>56.3</b>	<b>64.0</b>	<b>78.7</b>	<b>.003</b>	<b>.196 (.000)</b>
<b>Labor unions</b>	<b>61.3</b>	<b>71.7</b>	<b>78.4</b>	<b>.029</b>	<b>.174 (.001)</b>
<b>Neighborhood associations</b>	<b>63.6</b>	<b>62.5</b>	<b>74.0</b>	<b>.099</b>	<b>.112 (.029)</b>

Table 3: Contacting public Officials, by Type of Group

Percent reporting “High” or “Very High” *Commitment to the Environment* in the city

City Councilors; n=189

Type of group	Contact with Group over the Last Month		Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
	No contact	Yes contact		
Business associations	54.0	72.1	.061	.155 (.035)
Specific companies	60.8	56.3	.361	.009 (.904)
Nonprofits other than environmental	59.1	62.3	.585	.056 (.452)
Environmental groups	59.5	63.6	.912	.031 (.672)
Labor unions	60.0	60.0	.917	-.013 (.865)
Neighborhood associations	61.3	59.0	.876	-.033 (.657)

City Administrators; n=384

Type of group	Frequency of Contact with Group		Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
	Less than once a month	Once a month or more		
Business associations	68.8	69.9	.934	.018 (.713)
Specific companies	69.0	69.7	.742	.020 (.694)
Nonprofits other than environmental	67.4	70.4	.824	.030 (.554)
<b>Environmental groups</b>	<b>60.2</b>	<b>78.0</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.194 (.000)</b>
<b>Labor unions</b>	<b>64.8</b>	<b>80.6</b>	<b>.005</b>	<b>.136 (.007)</b>
Neighborhood associations	66.0	70.6	.424	.058 (.246)

Table 4: Contacting Public Officials, by Type of Group

Percent reporting “High” or “Very High” *Commitment Sustainability* in the city

City Councilors; n=189

	Contact with Group over the Last Month			
Type of group	No contact	Yes contact	Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
Business associations	60.5	72.1	.261	.120 (.104)
Specific companies	64.3	68.8	.845	.036 (.625)
Nonprofits other than environmental	64.4	64.2	.676	.024 (.746)
Environmental groups	63.8	68.2	.230	-.022 (.765)
Labor unions	65.2	60.0	.797	-.048 (.514)
Neighborhood associations	65.0	63.8	.832	-.028 (.701)

City Administrators; n=384

	Frequency of Contact with Group			
Type of group	Less than once a month	Once a month or more	Significance of x2	Correlation (significance)
Business associations	72.2	71.0	.958	-.014 (.784)
Specific companies	69.0	72.0	.715	.037 (.462)
Nonprofits other than environmental	66.9	73.0	.338	.072 (.147)
Environmental groups	<b>61.3</b>	<b>80.0</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.203 (.000)</b>
Labor unions	<b>65.9</b>	<b>81.5</b>	<b>.007</b>	<b>.142 (.005)</b>
Neighborhood associations	<b>58.8</b>	<b>74.9</b>	<b>.008</b>	<b>.133 (.007)</b>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The other cities besides Boston were Cambridge, Lynn, Somerville, and Worcester.

<sup>2</sup> Initially, 549 questionnaires were mailed, and eight of the recipients were later determined to no longer be city councilors. For the purposes of computing the response rate, these eight recipients were removed from the denominator for a response rate of  $(102/541)*100 = 35.1\%$ . We use the generic term “councilor” here, although some cities may refer to their representatives as Aldermen (as in Milwaukee), Supervisors (as in San Francisco), or Commissioners (as in Portland).

<sup>3</sup> The City of Columbus, OH, has an ethics ordinance that apparently prohibits public officials from responding to solicitations including surveys. We did, however, receive two responses from Columbus councilors.

<sup>4</sup> Questionnaires were mailed to 894 identified individuals; nine were no longer in their respective positions and had not been replaced during the period of this survey. These nine were removed from the denominator of the response rate calculation. Response rate is  $(413/885)*100 = 46.7\%$

<sup>5</sup> Legislators of all types are a particularly difficult cohort to survey as they are concerned about creating a paper trail of issue stands—positions they may not want to be held to in the future. Even though subjects were told that responses would be held in confidence, it is difficult to overcome such suspicions. A thirty percent response rate is quite respectable for this group.

<sup>6</sup> Only the responses from administrators are used here as the questionnaire for councilors did not use an identical question.

<sup>7</sup> The surveys asked about a fourth type of nonprofit, “church or faith-based.” We had a great deal of difficulty identifying faith-based organizations active in local cities and the survey responses made it clear that most councilors and administrators had negligible or no contact with such organizations. In the end we decided to exclude this category because we judged the data to be insufficient in quantity.

<sup>8</sup> The question was identical for councilors and administrators except in one respect. In addition to the various interest group sectors, administrators were also asked to rate the likelihood of including “other city governments,” “Council of Governments or Metropolitan Planning Organization,” or “Regional development organization.”