

Climate Change and Global Warming

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BUREAUCRATIC DISCRETION AS KEY TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICY INNOVATION ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL HAZARDS MANAGEMENT

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In federal systems, the challenges for local governments in managing natural hazards generally, and addressing changes in hazard vulnerability due to a changing climate in particular, are significant. Standard collective action problems suggest constraints on proactive engagement on hazards, especially regarding climate change issues. Likewise, classic delegation problems as explained by principal agent theory should also be applied in the relationship between local elected officials and bureaucratic personnel and thereby complicate efforts to reduce climate change-related risk. However, in spite of these potential constraints, a number of cities in the United States have initiated a range of climate change mitigation and adaptation innovations and programmatic efforts. This paper demonstrates that constraints on proactive risk reduction efforts, such as collective action and principal agent problems, are effectively resolved by bureaucratic policymaking where administrators are supported by elected officials, who reflect broad consensus on climate issues in their local community. That is, elected officials sometimes act jointly with implementing agents to promote policy innovation and change through broad grants of discretionary authority. To assess this proposed explanation of hazards management innovation, we examined whether bureaucratic discretionary autonomy is greater in local governments where climate issues are addressed directly, along with the broader question of what factors determine discretion in this domain. We used evidence from a national survey of local government administrators (administrators randomly sampled from 115 cities and counties across the United States) on the topic of community hazard management practices, including the issue of climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. The evidence points to greater discretionary autonomy being contingent on hazard specificity and elected principals' policy preferences. The implication of the analysis presented here is that meso-level bureaucrats in the United States function as key agents of policy innovation and change on hazards management broadly and on climate change issues specifically.

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