VERMONT POLICY INSTITUTE

Exploring Council of Governments Policy & Implementation in the Vermont Context

2025 Fall Semester

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1. Introduction

1.1 Acknowledgements

This research project is intended to support the Spring 2026 Masters of Public Administration Capstone class (PA 6750) in its exploration of council of governments implementation in Vermont. The work presented here, which includes both case studies of councils of governments in other states and a brief review of the literature on councils of governments, is designed to provide the Capstone students and the Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies (VAPDA) with preliminary research which will inform their deeper analysis of this policy question.

This project was made possible through the support of the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships, which proposed the project and provided us with resources and connections to field experts which guided our research. We learned a great deal through this research and feel fortunate to have been given the opportunity to contribute to such an important discussion. We are extremely grateful for the Leahy Institute for their guidance and support throughout this process.

1.2 Background

Vermont's system of regional governance is increasingly misaligned with the scale and complexity of responsibilities facing municipalities. Vermont's small, rural towns are expected to manage multi-year projects, apply for complex grants, and deliver a range of public services from road maintenance to flood recovery and housing development. Many of these responsibilities require professional capacity that small municipal governments, which are often composed of volunteers, simply don't have.

The recent Act 181 DHCD and VERTA Steering Committee joint report on strategies to improve Vermont's rural technical assistance identifies this central problem well. In order to deliver on key projects, municipalities rely on a wide range of technical assistance providers which lack coordination and standardization, including state agencies, regional planning commissions, and nonprofit providers. This fragmented process creates a heavy administrative burden which prevents many small municipalities from completing multi-year projects and accessing key state and federal funding. (Vermont DHCD & VERTA Steering Committee, 2025)

Vermont's regional planning commissions (RPCs) were created to help alleviate some of these burdens by providing municipalities with technical assistance and planning, while connecting them with state agencies in the absence of county governments. And while the state legislature has taken steps to enhance the capacities of RPCs, such as allowing them to enter into intermunicipal shared service agreements, they still lack the capacity and statutory authority to meet the full needs of struggling municipalities. Very few shared service agreements have been formed to date, and RPCs are often treated narrowly as public sector consultants who lack the ability to directly administer services on behalf of municipalities. (VAPDA & NADO Research Foundation, 2025) In the wake of the devastating flooding of 2023 and 2024, small towns struggled to secure federal disaster relief funds, making their capacity struggles more visible and the need for a solution more urgent. (Hellman, 2024) This project seeks to provide a preliminary analysis of councils of governments as one solution to Vermont's rural governance challenges.

2. Executive Summary

Regional Governance: Fragmentation, Framework and Costs

The persistence of Vermont's rural governance struggles can be explained by collective action failures which result from a fragmented system of municipal governments. Feiock's Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework explains how multiple government bodies sharing responsibility for shared policy problems can cause collective action problems. Cooperation is often undermined by free riding, difficulty monitoring the results of investments, and lack of trust among municipalities. (Feiock 2013) Furthermore, factors such as the internal structure of municipalities and the number of municipalities partner to the agreement can pose information and agency costs which deter cooperation even when municipalities recognize the benefits of cooperating. (Kwon & Feiock 2010) These risks intensify as policy challenges become more complex and long term relative to the capacity of municipalities, hence requiring more encompassing modes of collaboration such as COGs. (Feiock 2013; Shrestha & Feiock 2011)

Empirical research shows that cooperation, even in the form of a COG, does not mean that policy outcomes will necessarily be more efficient. However, Bel and Sebő's analysis of existing work tells us that cost savings for smaller municipalities are in fact more likely and more pronounced when authority for services lies in a formal institution rather than ad hoc agreements. (Bel and Sebő 2018) Informal cooperation generates higher costs for transaction and coordination of services, diminishing efforts to make government services more efficient, in turn limiting long-term gains from cooperative investments.

The existing work on interjurisdictional agreements (IJAs) reinforces the argument that informal avenues of cooperation without an institutional authority are extremely limited. While such agreements allow municipalities to preserve autonomy, they do not constitute regional governance and crumble in low-capacity environments without an institution to manage negotiation, monitoring, and enforcement. (Andrew 2009) Cooperation inherently carries three distinct forms of risks: coordination risk, division risk, and defection risk. These risks discourage municipalities from entering or maintaining collaborative agreements, particularly in regions like

Vermont which contain many small governments or complex service needs. (Carr & Hawkins 2013)

Institutional Success

Research on the capacities of COGs finds that they have remained viable regional governance institutions in diverse policy networks across the United States. Wolf and Bryan find that efficient COGs derive their capacity mainly from sustained, institutionalized modes of coordination such as elected governing boards, professional technical staff, and statutory mandates for funding or services. (Wolf & Bryan 2009) These structural features would allow COGs to supersede the current capacity of Vermont's RPCs, allowing them to administer services and fund projects at a greater scale. (Wolf & Bryan 2009; Feiock 2013)

Formal regional governance institutions emerge and sustain themselves over time by building trust through repeated interaction to eventually lower political barriers and create more formal governance bodies. (Alpert et al. 2006; Kwon & Feiock 2010) Informal collaborations and networks can sometimes contribute to building necessary trust to form regional governance bodies, although trust alone does not sustain large-scale and long-term cooperation. Focusing events like natural disasters or an infrastructure crisis shift political incentives towards cooperation and are an opportunity for the pitfalls of the current cooperation network to be exposed. (Alpert et al. 2006) Vermont's recent flooding exposed the limits of our regional governance network's capacity to respond to the dire needs of its constituents, revealing the coordination failures of the current system. (Lebel et al. 2006).

Our study of individual COGs in other states lends support to the conclusion that COGs are a practical, proven method for expanding regional capacity. While some COGs studied differ from Vermont in their population and geography, their projects address challenges, from disaster management to economic development, which Vermont's rural towns stand to benefit from. Moreover, the successes drawn from COGs in Connecticut and Massachusetts are directly applicable to Vermont as they operate in small, rural, New England town-based governance systems. Across these cases, COGs demonstrate the ability to manage complex, multi-year projects and effectively deliver services to their member governments. However, as we note with each case study, more research is required to measure the exact amount of cost savings and long term benefits COGs provide member governments as opposed to non participating governments.

Long-term Resilience and Sustainability

Beyond more efficient service delivery, the importance of building strong regional governance can be seen in its ability to enhance long-term resilience and rural sustainability. Authors argue that managing social-ecological systems under conditions of uncertainty is fundamentally a challenge of governance rather than technical capability. So, to tackle problems of regional governance, rather than focusing purely on capacity through funding or elite professional staff, “coordination-enhancing” characteristics should be prioritized. Some such characteristics include participation and deliberation that builds trust and understanding, polycentric and multilayered institutional agreements, and accountable authorities that pursue just distributions of benefits and risks. (Lebel et. al 2006) Comparative research on the issue of rural contraction emphasizes the need for integrated structures that include local governments along with residents and separate cooperative entities in order to sustain economic and social wellbeing in contracting rural regions. (Zhao 2023)

Final Thoughts

While Vermont’s RPCs play a role in planning and technical assistance, according to evidence reviewed in this report, they are insufficient to resolve the state’s underlying regional governance capacity challenges. Councils of governments provide a more robust and sustainable institutional model, capable of reducing failures of collective action, (Feiock 2013) achieving economies of scale, (Bel & Sebő 2018) managing inherent risks of interlocal cooperation, (Carr & Hawkins 2013; Kwon & Feiock 2010; Andrew 2009) and supporting long term resilience in regional governance and rural development. (Lebel et al. 2006; Zhao 2023)

3. Academic Insights

3.1 *The Institutional Collective Action Framework,* Richard C. Feiock (2013)

Research Question

How do fragmented government structures create collective action problems among local governments, and what institutional arrangements are most effective at reducing the costs and of interlocal cooperation? The article asks why some interlocal cooperative efforts succeed while others fail, given shared policy problems.

Key Takeaways

Fragmented authority within municipalities produces collective action dilemmas, including free-riding and disputes over cost burdens. Feiock’s Institutional Collective Action (ICA) framework explains how different modes of collaboration, from informal agreements to councils of governments, vary in their ability to reduce these costs and risks. Feiock finds that collaboration outcomes depend on the nature and scope of the policy problem, the number of actors, and the level of institutionalization chosen.

Application to Vermont

This source is directly relevant to Vermont, given rural towns must coordinate to deliver services efficiently. Vermont faces recurring ICA problems in areas such as emergency services, transportation, water and wastewater systems, solid waste management, broadband deployment, and regional planning. The ICA framework helps explain why voluntary cooperation among towns can break down, and offers a range of collaborative mechanisms that make cooperation less costly. The article explains that coordination to solve a wide and complex set of ICA problems (of the sort Vermont towns face) requires formal, contractual governance bodies which resemble COGs, rather than narrower, less formal arrangements such as intermunicipal service sharing agreements.

Future Considerations

The ICA framework is primarily theoretical and synthesizes prior empirical work rather than presenting new data. More empirical evidence from rural, low-capacity states like Vermont would strengthen its applicability. Future research could also better measure long-term performance and accountability outcomes of different regional governance models.

3.2 *Building the Capacity to Act Regionally: Formation of the Regional Transportation Authority in South Florida,* Alpert, Gainsborough, Wallis (2006)

Research Question

The article seeks to understand how informal modes of regional cooperation function, and how these networks can eventually evolve into more formal regional governance institutions. The article focuses on the creation of a regional transportation authority in South Florida as a case study.

Key Takeaways

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with key actors involved in transportation policy in South Florida and administered a questionnaire to participants in a regional transportation summit to collect their data. The authors find that existing informal networks between businesses, local governments, regional planning councils, and other stakeholders allow for repeated interaction which builds trust between stakeholder groups. This shared trust is crucial to stakeholders' willingness and capacity to form more formal regional governance bodies in the future. For instance, the existing Tri-Rail system in South Florida required coordination between transportation companies and local governments which formed the basis of the creation of the regional transportation authority. Researchers also found that a perceived risk of crisis and the presence of policy entrepreneurs are important conditions for the emergence of regional governance structures.

Application to Vermont

This source is relevant to Vermont because it explains the conditions which facilitate successful regional governance. The paper suggests that Vermont's existing regional planning commissions and intermunicipal service sharing agreements are forms of collaboration which increase communication and trust among relevant stakeholders in each region. These forms of collaboration can aid the transition to a more durable council of governments model. Additionally, the paper's finding that focusing events facilitate regional governance is relevant to Vermont. Vermont's 2023 and 2024 floods have caused lasting damage to rural towns, and may serve as focusing events which make local governments more willing to engage in increased cooperation.

Future Considerations
The study's theoretical framework regarding network dynamics is widely applicable, however the case study used to demonstrate that framework focuses on a metropolitan area in South Florida. The case study therefore diverges from Vermont's small, rural landscape.

3.3 *Does inter-municipal cooperation really reduce delivery costs? An empirical evaluation of the role of scale economies, transaction costs, and governance arrangements,* Bel and Sebő (2018)

Research Question
The paper seeks to determine whether inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) reduces the cost of delivering local public services. It also asks under what conditions cooperation is likely to produce cost savings for municipalities.

Key Takeaways
After conducting a meta-regression analysis of all existing empirical studies on the relationship between IMC and cost savings, researchers came to three major conclusions. First, municipalities with small populations benefit the most from IMC because of their ability to create economies of scale in service delivery. As a municipality's population increases, the cost savings derived from IMC decrease. Second, the delegation of service delivery power and authority to a supramunicipal government is associated with greater cost savings for participating municipalities, as municipalities are able to minimize monitoring and coordination costs. By contrast, informal, fragmented modes of cooperation are less cost effective. Finally, researchers found that high transaction costs of service delivery are not clearly associated with cost savings derived from IMC.

Application to Vermont
This paper is directly applicable to Vermont because of the state's numerous small, rural towns. The analysis finds that small towns are precisely the sort of local governments that are most

likely to benefit from the economies of scale achieved from IMC. The paper also finds that cost savings are highest when IMC is done through a formal authority, suggesting that councils of governments are an effective method of IMC.

Future Considerations
While some of the data are taken from the U.S., most are taken from European sources. This may affect applicability to Vermont's political context. Furthermore, the researchers do not deal with the question of how public service quality is affected by IMC.

3.4 *Shared services in New York state: A reform that works,* Homsy, Qian, Wang, & Warner (2013)

Research Question
The article seeks to assess the level of New York rural town collaboration in the delivery of public services, as well as the motivators and barriers to such service sharing. The article also seeks to assess the reported cost savings, service quality improvements, and inter-jurisdictional service delivery increases that result from service sharing.

Key Takeaways
Researchers conducted a survey of 946 New York cities, towns, counties, and villages to gauge the extent of service sharing, along with the motivators, barriers, and reported benefits of the practice. A majority of municipalities reported overall cost savings and improved service quality as a result of service sharing. Administrative and support services, such as tax collection and assessment, energy, health insurance, and building maintenance, show the highest rates of reported cost savings. Respondents also expressed that the lack of willing partners and high implementation and maintenance costs are the largest management struggles faced in shared service agreements. Further obstacles to forming shared service agreements include concerns over liability, accountability concerns, prohibitive state laws, and concerns over local control.

Application to Vermont
The respondent data provided by this source is relevant to Vermont because it studies small towns and villages which are similar to those in Vermont. The paper's findings, which demonstrate fairly high levels of cost savings, service quality improvement, and even expansion of service delivery, are encouraging signs that inter-municipal collaboration can create economies of scale which tangibly benefit public service provision in rural towns. The data dealing with perceived challenges and obstacles of service sharing agreements is also relevant to Vermont, as it serves as an important insight into problems which ought to be addressed for a council of governments approach to succeed.

Future Considerations
The study relies on survey data, which is less reliable than first hand financial records. Additionally, while the response rate was fairly high (60%), the fact that 40% did not respond risks creating a self-selection bias which the researchers do not address.

3.5 *Sustainable Rural Development Under the Background of Rural Contraction,* Binyu Zhao (2023)

Research Question
How can rural regions experiencing rural contraction pursue development sustainably while also mitigating the consequences of contraction? How can rural areas reorganize development under labor loss, declining service capacity, and a weakened local autonomy, drawing from a comparative analysis of Minnesota and China.

Key Takeaways
Rural contraction is institutional rather than demographic and results in diminished capacity for collective action and planning. Through a comparative study, Zhao finds that rural regions adapt better when governance structures coordinate across social, economic and environmental domains rather than relying on isolated, sector specific interventions. Central to this article is the tripartite cooperation model, in which governance institutions act as coordinators involving local government, residents and third party cooperative enterprises. Without such cooperation the cycle of rural contraction will never be broken.

Application to Vermont
This paper's findings provide relevant suggestions and analysis for Vermont's rural contraction issue. It describes the integration of different parts of civic and economic society that are necessary in order to combat rural contraction and ensure sustainable development.

Future Considerations
Zhao's study is qualitative and comparative and does not empirically test specific mechanisms of governance. Additionally, the tripartite model is developed within a different institutional context to COGs and Vermont.

3.6 *Transaction Cost, Exchange Embeddedness, and Interlocal Cooperation in Local Public Goods Supply,* Shrestha & Feiock (2011)

Research Question

The paper asks under what conditions local governments cooperate to deliver public services. Specifically, it analyzes how transaction costs and exchange embeddedness affect the likelihood and level of cooperation.

Key Takeaways

The authors find that high transaction costs and low levels of reciprocity in government relations decrease the likelihood and level of interlocal cooperation. Transaction costs are measured in two ways in the paper. First, the degree to which a transaction is asset-specific, meaning the investment governments make in a particular service is specific to that transaction with limited alternative uses. Such asset specificity creates the risk of parties behaving opportunistically to gain disproportionately from the exchange. Second, measurement difficulties, in which the outcomes of an exchange are hard to measure, create the opportunity for governments to free ride on others' investments. Interlocal cooperation is more likely to occur the lower these two transaction costs are. When transaction costs are high, municipalities have a strong incentive to provide the service in-house. Interlocal cooperation is also made more likely when governments have high levels of trust and repeated interaction. Additionally, researchers found that small cities are more likely to cooperate than large cities because they benefit more from increased economies of scale.

Application to Vermont

This article is relevant to Vermont because it suggests that Vermont's small, rural towns are suited for regional cooperation, while also identifying obstacles to cooperation which are worth considering. The small size of Vermont towns makes them especially likely to cooperate on the provision of public services because of the benefits they would derive from economies of scale. Additionally, to the extent that towns have existing bonds of trust with one another, perhaps formed by RPCs or ISSAs, they are well-suited to engage in higher levels of cooperation such as councils of governments. However, certain public services such as waste water treatment and broadband deployment may suffer from high transaction costs which may disincentivize the formation of councils of governments' provision of these services.

Future Considerations

The study uses data from cities and surrounding suburbs in Georgia, which may diverge in key ways from Vermont's governance landscape. The ability of formal cooperative relationships, including councils of governments, to reduce transaction costs (particularly measurement difficulties) through improved coordination and monitoring, is not discussed here.

3.7 *Overcoming the Barriers to Cooperation: Intergovernmental Service Agreements*, S.W. Kwon and Feiock (2010)

Research Question

Why do local governments fail to implement interlocal service agreements, despite recognizing their benefits? The article specifically examines how transaction costs and political structures influence the decision of municipalities to cooperate.

Key Takeaways

The article begins by establishing that interlocal cooperation takes part in two stages. First, municipalities determine whether cooperation is beneficial. Second, municipalities assess the costs associated with a service sharing agreement and decide whether the costs outweigh the perceived benefit. Researchers found that municipalities are more likely to consider a sharing agreement when experiencing high service demands, which were measured by factors such as population size, population density, the scale of the service provided, and levels of fiscal stress. Agency costs, which measured the degree to which municipal officials have an incentive to internally cooperate, were negatively associated with the consideration of sharing agreements. High costs of discovering the benefits of cooperation, which are driven by having a large number of potential partner municipalities, were also found to disincentivize the consideration of sharing agreements. Implementation was found to be dependent on the transaction costs associated with the agreement. Transaction costs were found to be lower, and thus the likelihood of cooperation higher, when there existed high levels of trust formed by prior intermunicipal interactions and at-large, rather than district-based elections were held.

Application to Vermont

This paper identifies several key features of municipalities which determine the likelihood of service sharing agreement consideration and adoption that are relevant to Vermont's consideration of a shift toward councils of governments. Factors such as information cost and agency cost, for instance, are clear barriers to cooperation that should be addressed by policy makers to increase the willingness of municipalities to join councils of governments and other such service sharing arrangements. The paper also suggests that larger services, which create increased economies of scale benefits for collaborating municipalities, incentivize cooperation. Given that Vermont's existing municipalities are small, they stand to benefit tremendously from such arrangements.

Future Considerations

The study relies on survey data, which is less reliable than direct measurement, especially given the 33.3% response rate received. Additionally, the data are pulled from municipalities with populations over 10,000, making the results potentially less applicable to Vermont's small municipalities.

3.8 *Identifying the Capacities of Regional Councils of Government,* Wolf, J. F., & Bryan, T. K. (2009)

Research Question

What organizational, institutional and resource capacities have enabled councils of governments to function as viable methods of regional governance across the United States over time?

Key Takeaways

Rather than coercive authority, a council of government's structure derives its effectiveness from convening, coordinating planning, managing regulatory review processes and providing technical assistance within and across jurisdictions. Wolf and Bryan show that the fundamental organizational features of councils of governments have remarkably sustained over time, even as their roles and policy environments have evolved. The organizational structures of councils of governments dictate their capacity and the council of government's policy outcomes. Things like elected policy boards, in-house staff, technical experts and stable funding streams anchored by government planning mandates sustain themselves over time.

Application to Vermont

This article is relevant to Vermont's governance context characterized by fragmented municipalities that largely lack the capacity to exert basic government functions. Wolf and Bryan's findings suggest that regional governance doesn't necessitate consolidation or formal authority to be effective, rather, institutional capacity flows from stable processes and professional support, largely lacking in Vermont's fragmented local governance network. While Vermont's RPCs may already embody many of the COG's capacities identified in this article, Wolf and Bryan's differentiating qualities are largely those of neutral facilitation of capacities among jurisdictions, elected policy boards, technical expertise in staffing, and fiscal stability.

Future Considerations

While this study is meant to cover all 500+ noted COGs across the USA, its findings are largely grounded in metropolitan and multi-jurisdicational regions with greater access to resources than those found in states like Vermont. It also does not empirically test whether or not the capacities identified in the article directly lead to improved outcomes. Future research should focus on examining how institutions maintain legitimacy and how identified capacities perform when resources are scarce.

3.9 *Explaining Local Government Cooperation on Public Works: Evidence from Michigan,* Leroux, K., & Carr, J. B (2007)

Research Question

What factors explain why local governments engage in interlocal cooperation for public works services, despite the presence of scale economies that would predict and reward more widespread collaboration?

Key Takeaways

LeRoux and Carr conduct a large-N empirical analysis of interlocal cooperation on public works services using survey data from 468 local governments. Although public works services are capital intensive and exhibit strong scale economies, cooperation is uneven across service types and jurisdictions. They provide four groups of factors that might explain why local governments opt to collaborate on public services: local economic factors, characteristics of the communities in areas adjacent to the local government, demographic characteristics of the local government, and the influences of policy and planning networks. Markers from any of these factors like population growth, geographic conditions, or fiscal stress all influence cooperation decisions yet no single one is determinative across services. Importantly, Local governments affiliated through policy and planning networks like a Council of Governments or Regional Planning Commissions may be more likely to cooperate on services, although formal membership is not a statistically significant predictor of cooperation.

Application to Vermont

While Vermont towns face many of the same issues identified in Michigan, the findings suggest that fiscal barriers matter differently among service types, and cooperation will not emerge automatically in response to cost pressures, scale economies, or membership within a policy and planning network. Cooperation is rather more likely where there is flexibility and political discretion in the provision of services. Due to Vermont's diverse local government landscape, each municipality with varying needs, this paper underscores that regional governance strategies for Vermont ought to be targeted, service-specific, and sensitive to demographic and political constraints, not relying on binary membership of an institution like an RPC or a COG.

Future Considerations

The study is limited to a single state with an existing strong county role in public works, limiting the ability to generalize findings directly to Vermont's more town based system. Factors like cooperation and membership of a policy or planning organization are treated as binary, ignoring depth and diversity in specific cases of agreements or institutional membership.

3.10 *Governance and the capacity to manage resilience in regional social-ecological systems,* Lebel et. al. (2006)

Research Question

When confronted with lack of resilience, capacity to adapt, and conserving sources of innovation and renewal, how do we make decisions about adapting? Who manages the decisions? This paper examines how particular attributes of local governance enhance the capacity of regional institutions to manage resilience in a social ecological system, defined as ecosystem goods and services interacting with human users that is embedded in political, economic and power relations.

Key Takeaways
The ability to manage resilience in regional governance systems is a problem of governance, rather than an ecological or technical one, though empirical data varies across contexts. Three specific attributes of governance are highlighted to build resilience: participation and deliberation that builds trust and understanding, polycentric and multilayered institutional agreements, and accountable authorities that pursue just distributions of benefits and risks.

Application to Vermont
In the context of limited municipal capacity and increasing uncertainty across all policy sectors, the article provides a strong framework to understand governance challenges in Vermont. Emphasis on deliberation is especially important for a state like Vermont with a thriving civic culture. RPCs generally already fit the institutional markets that Lebel lays out, though there ought to be more of a focus on inclusion, accountability and social justice as to not disproportionately shift risks onto smaller towns.

Future Considerations
This study is entirely based on qualitative and post hoc comparison of case studies that were not originally designed to test the hypothesis in the study, extremely limiting causal inference. While the qualitative analysis present in the article is certainly valuable, the measurements provided are imprecise and the authors acknowledge that many of the associations discussed in the article remain unexplained.

3.11 *Strategies for Regional Collaboration | HUD USER* (2026).

Research Question
What are the dominant strategies, and shifts in them, in regional collaboration among local governments in the US, and what capacities and conditions enable effective collaboration across jurisdictions to address capacity challenges?

Key Takeaways
Regional collaboration across history has been distinguished between "old regionalism", focusing on structural governance changes and "new regionalism", emphasizing cooperative interlocal relationships not constrained by political or jurisdictional boundaries. Contemporary

regional planning relies more and more on voluntary cooperation among governments and stakeholders to tackle cross-jurisdictional challenges like infrastructure, economic development, and service delivery. New capacities cultivated through interlocal cooperation are used by local governments to leverage resources, improving outcomes, building relationships and addressing shared problems.

Application to Vermont

This review cites evidence supporting the idea that local governments choose collaboration supports the idea that COGs or RPCs can play a proactive role in fostering cooperation among Vermont's municipalities. The article also identifies certain capacities required for effective collaboration, including but not limited to qualities like technical expertise or specific intergovernmental contracts, which would provide an especially useful lens when examining Vermont's RPCs specific pitfalls in regional governance.

Future Considerations

Because this is a practicing focused highlight article rather than a peer reviewed study, it does not provide empirical tests of causal mechanisms linking collaboration strategies to specific outcomes.

3.12 *Recent Developments in the Study of Interjurisdictional Agreements: An Overview and Assessment,* Andrew, S. A. (2009*)*

Research Question

What does contemporary literature reveal about why local governments adopt interjurisdictional agreements (IJAs), how they function, and what limitations exist in understanding their effects?

Key Takeaways

Andrew provides an analysis of two decades of research on IJAs, positioning them as a tool for dealing with capacity issues due to fragmentation. IJAs vary widely in form, some resembling mutual aid agreements while others are legally binding service contracts. There are three dominant analytical approaches to literature around IJAs: economic and contracting models that frame them as production choices, network based approaches that see them as something to emphasize trust and institutional collective action, and qualitative case studies that focus heavily on political leadership and negotiation. Andrew explains that IJAs allow governments to pursue greater efficiency and capacity while maintaining autonomy, but also that evidence is limited and uneven. Additionally, he notes that they do not necessarily constitute regional governments, rather instruments of governance that depend on institutions and their capacity to coordinate with one another.

Application to Vermont

Andrew's analysis is relevant to Vermont's fragmented government structure characterized by limited capacity. The article sheds light on the limitations of the RPC model, given RPCs are based on ad hoc, service specific cooperation without a real institutional framework or statutory authority to codify and sustain effective IJAs over time. While these agreements can form organically without a significant framework like a COG, Andrew suggests that in a fragmented, low-capacity network of municipalities, IJAs are more difficult to come to fruition, and often do not fulfill their objectives. A Council of Governments with institutional elements that increase and stabilise capacity like elected governing boards, professional staff and endurable fiscal bases would be enabled to function as platforms for IJA formation and management, effectively addressing institutional gaps both in Vermont and explained in the article.

Future Considerations

Andrew highlights gaps in the empirical literature around IJAs, particularly regarding the outcome of IJA adoption and their ability to generate widespread efficiencies. Most studies examined focus on adoption and not long-term performance, and data limitations don't allow for causal inference. Future research should examine how IJAs operate successfully within COGs, especially in fragmented low-capacity conditions.

3.13 *The Costs of Cooperation: What the Research Tells Us about Managing the Risks of Service Collaborations in the U.S.* Carr, J. B., & Hawkins, C. V.

Research Question

What types of risks faced by local governments inhibit them from engaging in shared service and collaborative agreements, and what institutional strategies in existing research can we use to effectively manage those risks?

Key Takeaways

The authors argue that cooperation is costly, risky and highly contingent rather than a straightforward solution to capacity issues. There are three primary sources of risk that undermine potential for collaboration among locales: Coordination costs, meaning the difficulties faced over negotiating and aligning preferences across jurisdictions, division costs, meaning disputes over how things like benefits, costs and responsibilities are allocated, and defection costs, meaning the risk that one party fails to comply or behaves opportunistically. These risks become intensified in regions with many governments or complex public service needs and networks, like Vermont. Collaboration is most feasible and risk is least present in more run of the mill system maintenance services like infrastructure or flood response. However the exact opposite is true for more politically salient or lifestyle services. Cooperation can be stabilized through a series of adaptive or restrictive contracts in the form of new institutions like a Council of Governments or other authority or policy network, but there is always a baseline level of risk when cooperating.

Application to Vermont

Carr and Hawkins provide a framework for understanding why Vermont's RPC network fails in the status quo. Due to the intense fragmentation and widespread capacity issues across most jurisdictions in the state, all three of the primary sources of risk are intensified within the state directly preventing widescale cooperation. Additionally, the most important markers of success in reducing risk, namely formalized institutions for interlocal cooperation like a COG, are scarce in Vermont. In the Vermont context, according to Carr and Hawkins, a COG would likely function more effectively than an RPC in absorbing transaction costs of cooperation for essential system maintenance services that are struggling in the status quo.

Future Considerations

Much of the literature used in this article is focused on the binary of the formation of the collaborative agreements, rather than markers of their continued success, so empirical evidence remains mixed.

4. Case Studies

4.1 *Alamo Area Council of Governments (AACOG)*

Background

The Alamo Area Council of Governments serves 13 counties which together span 12,584 square miles and contain a population of 2.5 million people. The Alamo Region has rural, urban, and suburban areas, with San Antonio being the major city in the region. Established in 1967 as a formal COG, AACOG is a voluntary organization of local governments and sub municipal organizations which serves the Alamo Region through planning, information, and coordination activities. Funding comes from membership dues and state and federal grants. AACOG's governing body, the Board of Directors, is made up of elected representatives from AACOG's member governments, and meets once a month. AACOG's executive committee is also made up of representatives from AACOG's member governments, and meets quarterly to review and approve the annual budget, recommend policy, and communicate with human resources. AACOG also has subcommittees for particular policy areas.

Key Functions

AACOG functions as a high capacity provider of both technical assistance and direct public services in the Alamo region. It provides technical assistance to member governments by supporting grant applications and operating the Alamo Area Regional Law Enforcement Academy. AACOG also administers the Regional Mutual Aid Agreement, which allows the program's 57 member governments to request aid from each other in the form of law enforcement, fire services, emergency medical services, and public works. AACOG also administers a range of resident services including senior nutrition programs, transportation services, caregiver support, health and wellness initiatives, disability services, and housing weatherization programs.

Application to Vermont

AACOG demonstrates how a formal council of governments can provide a range of shared services to member municipalities efficiently and at scale. AACOG's broad statutory authority to directly administer services on the part of municipalities allow it to go far beyond planning and consulting for towns, which is a critical part of its success that separates it from current Vermont RPCs.

Future Considerations

AACOG serves a large population which is about four times as large as the entire state of Vermont, giving it access to greater funding and specialized staff which may make direct comparisons difficult.

4.2 *Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG)*

Background

The Capitol Region Council of Governments is located in Connecticut, and serves a population of 976,248 and a land area of 1,047 square miles. CRCOG is a formally recognized entity which receives state and federal funding. CRCOG serves the city of Hartford, Connecticut, and is a part of a larger group of COGs making up the Connecticut area. Funding comes from membership dues and state and federal grants. The COG is directed by an Executive Committee and Policy Board, which is composed of chief elected officials of member municipalities and whose job is to conduct the affairs of the council and oversee its various sub-committees.

Key Functions

CRCOG provides a range of services to member municipalities. It has secured over $100 million in federal funding to help fix municipal infrastructure, and administers the Transportation Rural Improvement Program (TRIP), which funds transportation projects in rural municipalities across the region. For example, CRCOG has secured competitive grants to fund a railway project connecting Windsor Locks to Enfield, which is expected to be completed in 2028. CRCOG also plans and funds brownfield remediation.

Application to Vermont

CRCOG's ability to secure large sums of federal funds and implement complex, long-term projects for member municipalities demonstrates the expanded capacity which COGs possess. Programs like TRIP are able to fund and oversee multi-year projects which provide rural communities with desperately needed infrastructure, while alleviating the municipalities themselves of administrative burdens. CRCOG also contains a regional planning commission, which acts as one of its standing committees alongside its municipal services, transportation, and emergency services committees. This specialized division of labor, of which regional planning is just one part, demonstrates the increased capacity and efficiency COGs possess when compared to Vermont's RPCs.

Future Considerations

One limitation of CRCOG's applicability to Vermont is the presence of Hartford, which contains a large urban population. Hartford's population may allow for greater staffing and larger project scale than would be feasible in a Vermont COG. Further analysis would be useful to determine which of CRCOG's successes are driven by its large population drawn from Hartford.

4.3 *Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG)*

Background

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) is a volunteer membership organization that serves 26 towns in Franklin County Massachusetts. Funding comes from annual town membership fees and state and federal grants. The governance structure is a 29 person council. Each town assigns one representative from their selectboard, the COG collectively elects two representatives for three year terms, and one representative is assigned from the Franklin Regional Planning Board. Representative votes are weighted based on town population and property valuation. FRCOG's main areas of focus are advocacy, economic development, climate resilience and land use, emergency preparedness, community health, shared municipal services, and transportation. FRCOG does not pass legislation nor control how towns spend their budgets on any of these issues. When executing a project in any one of these service areas, FRCOG either charges participating municipalities an assessment specific to that project or secures federal or state funding to fund the project.

Key Functions

FRCOG provides a number of services and projects which municipal towns would not be able to provide individually. One important feature of FRCOG is its Collective Purchasing Program, which allows municipalities to engage in volume discount buying by leveraging their collective buying power. The program also saves municipalities money on administration and legal compliance with the bidding process. FRCOG also helps communities with emergency preparedness. FRCOG is responsible for emergency resource caches, preparedness planning, a regional emergency communications system for first responders, and it works with homeland security and acquires funding for hospitals on an inter-town scale. FRCOG also helps towns with economic development by investing in brownfield renewal projects and creating downtown planning models which support business development in rural municipalities.

Application to Vermont

FRCOG is a helpful resource for understanding how Vermont may benefit from a COG system. FRCOG's support of economic development, emergency preparedness, and shared services in its rural municipalities address three of the major challenges facing Vermont towns. Franklin County, containing a largely rural economy with a population of just 71,000, shares many features of Vermont's counties and thus can serve as an applicable model for how a regional COG would function in Vermont.

Future Considerations

Future research would need to be conducted to identify the precise magnitude of cost savings towns are able to achieve through FRCOG's shared services programs. The same is true of projects implemented in any of their other major services areas.

4.4 *Northern Arizona Council of Government (NACOG)*

Background

The Northern Arizona Council of Governments (NACOG) is a formal COG that serves Arizona's Apache, Coconino, Navajo and Yavapai counties. The northern Arizona region is mostly rural, and encompasses over 37,000 square miles and serves approximately 576,000 people. NACOG is governed by a board of elected officials from member counties, towns, and tribal governments. NACOG focuses on directly providing its member governments with shared services and regional planning, while also funding and implementing specialized, ad-hoc projects.

Key Functions

A key feature of NACOG's success is its annual Community Needs Assessment (CNA), which informs its policy priorities each year. The CNA is an annual survey distributed to the residents of NACOG designed to measure the needs and priorities of the region. Community members are encouraged to comment on their experience with NACOG services, suggest possible improvements, and report any unmet needs. This wide range of feedback is key to informing NACOG's metrics of success for any given project.

Applications to Vermont
A relevant feature of NACOG is how effectively it works with counties and federally recognized Native American governance structures to administer services. Vermont contains a much smaller Native American population than northern Arizona. However, NACOG's success in respecting tribe territorial boundaries while facilitating access to public services is an encouraging sign of COG flexibility that can apply to Vermont. Furthermore, NACOG is capable of identifying and solving the most pressing challenges facing the region, including a growing elderly population and intensifying heat waves and natural disasters. Given that Vermont faces very similar issues of aging and natural disasters, NACOG's ability to provide comprehensive planning and emergency services exemplifies the benefits Vermont could derive from adopting a COG model.

Future Considerations
Further research should be completed on the precise costs municipalities save by joining NACOG. Additionally, northern Arizona's economy is less agricultural than Vermont's, which may affect the nature of the service programs and should be considered when drawing direct comparisons between the two regions.

4.5 *Northwest Hills Council of Governments (NHCOG)*

Background
The Connecticut Northwest Hills Council of Governments (NHCOG) is a formal council of governments serving 21 predominantly rural municipalities in northwestern Connecticut, with a total population of 114,000. Funding is sourced from membership dues and state and federal funding. NHCOG is governed by a 21-person council, containing one representative from each member municipality. It facilitates municipal service sharing and provides technical assistance in economic development, transportation planning, and emergency management.

Key Functions
Some specific NHCOG functions include their comprehensive model for rural-focused economic and infrastructure development, as highlighted in their Economic Development Proposal. This Proposal outlines a strategic plan for economic growth in Northwest Connecticut over 5 years, providing an overarching vision for the region's economy that highlights specific goals and a clear action plan. NHCOG also sponsors the Northwest Hills Public Safety Task Force. The task force is a coalition of ambulance workers, police, and other emergency personnel that meets monthly to discuss emergency management issues and develop effective responses. Additionally, this group advises the council on where to distribute Homeland Security Grant funds when allocated to the region. The task force also helped to develop the Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan,

a thorough five-year guide to navigating and mitigating the future effects of natural disasters. NHCOG is also the primary leader of Region 5 of the CT Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (EMHS). Region 5 is home to 43 towns and requires NHCOG to distribute grants as necessary and actively connect COG leaders and emergency personnel with educational opportunities to learn more about disaster preparedness.

Application to Vermont

Including the professional, experienced knowledge of first responders and emergency personnel is crucial to an effective emergency management plan. Many communities in Vermont struggled after the 2023 floods because regional planners were unable to distribute monetary aid effectively to those who needed it. NHCOG's Public Safety Task Force and designation as the Region 5 EMHS leader provide a platform for local issues to meet federal funding in a way that allocates investments to towns that most need it. NHCOG provides a practical, proven model for regional coordination and inter-municipal collaboration in a fellow rural, New England region.

Future Considerations

As with the other COGs studied thus far, more research is required to determine the precise cost savings and benefits member municipalities receive from NHCOG membership.

4.6 *Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SECOG)*

Background

The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SECOG) is a formal COG representing Southeastern Connecticut, a rural area with a population of about 280,000 and comprising 22 different township municipalities, along with affiliate non-voting members, including two Native American tribes, the Connecticut Department of Transportation, and the Southeast Area of Transit. The agency receives its funding from membership dues from the 22 voting municipalities, along with state and federal funds. The Agency acts as a resource to centralize and coordinate regional interests and planning. Its primary focuses consist of land use, transportation, and environmental planning.

Key Functions

The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments provides a range of functions for member municipalities, including delivering shared services, implementing hazard mitigation projects, coordinating emergency management, and technical assistance. SECOG also oversees the Metropolitan Planning Organization. It has historically worked with the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CT DOT) to adopt performance measures and specific targets to address traffic congestion and transportation safety. SECOG conducts quarterly counts of park-and-ride facilities and submits them to CT DOT, highlighting that they are actively collecting and tracking usage data for public facilities. SECOG has administered nine projects under their Local Transportation Capital Improvement Program as of December 2023.

Application to Vermont

This source is relevant to Vermont's transportation policy context by offering a measurable regional model that showcases the benefits of regionally coordinated transportation planning, congestion, data collection, and analysis to improve planning efficiency. It also provides a roadmap for collaboration with state officials, such as the Vermont Department of Transportation.

Future Considerations

There exists limited quantitative data on SECOG's long-term transportation outcomes, such as transit ridership growth, greenhouse gas reductions from increased public transport initiatives, or congestion mitigation. Further research could be done to analyze and compare pre- and post-implementation data from SECOG's transportation policy implementations.

This research project is the result of a semester of work by the entire team at the Vermont Policy Institute (VPI). The Vermont Policy Institute is the University of Vermont's premier undergraduate research and consulting group. VPI researches pressing local, state, and national issues and develops nuanced policy solutions to address them. VPI seeks to empower students to pursue individual and group research on topics they have vested interests in.

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