

Ethnicity doesn't seem to affect annexation decisions like race

October 1 2014, by Craig Chamberlain

In the American South, race has been shown in numerous studies to play a role in municipal annexation decisions: predominantly white municipalities were less likely to extend the city limits to include adjacent areas with a higher percentage of African-American residents, according to prior studies. But how are annexation decisions made in the Midwest, where an increase in immigration has resulted in an uptick in the Hispanic population? That's the question two University of Illinois researchers set out to answer.

Bev Wilson and Mary M. Edwards, professors in urban and regional planning, studied 192 incorporated towns across 10 states to determine whether the ethnicity of the population affected an area's chances of being annexed. They found that ethnicity – cultural heritage – appeared to be a minor factor relative to other demographic characteristics.

"There's lots of different theoretical explanations for what drives these cities and towns to annex territory," Wilson said. "And what we found was that some of these alternate explanations or theories were more strongly corroborated by the data."

Annexation can be a mutually beneficial maneuver. Municipalities use annexation to capture existing property taxes, or to put dibs on land that seems ripe for development. For property owners, annexation into a municipality typically entitles them to more public goods and services, such as water and sewer infrastructure, fire and police protection, access to libraries and recreation centers, and snow removal.

"That's one of the reasons that this process of selective annexation, which is also called underbounding, is problematic from a social justice or equity perspective," Wilson said, "because in those cases, if you're not annexed, then you're not able to make use of the benefits from those public goods and services."

Annexation laws vary from state to state. Only a few states permit involuntary annexation; most require a referendum proving that the majority of residents agree to join the municipality. Property owners outside a municipality also can initiate a petition requesting annexation. Studies dating back to the 1980s have shown that race can be a factor in whether such requests are approved.

"The earliest study I know of is from the Mississippi Delta," Wilson said, "and it found evidence of selective annexation, where you had incorporated areas that would extend their boundaries outward, but somehow avoid the low-income African-American areas."

The boom in Hispanic population in the Midwest over the past decade prompted Wilson and Edwards to use U.S. Census data to study whether ethnicity was a factor in annexation decisions. Their findings, published in a recent issue of *Urban Affairs Review*, revealed that while ethnicity may have played a small role, other [demographic characteristics](#) had more impact. The two that seemed most influential were the rates of home ownership and the ratio of working-age adults to children and senior citizens.

"The age-dependency ratio is often used as a proxy for measuring demand for public services," Wilson said. "So if you have a high age-dependency ratio, you might expect to spend more of your budget on services for senior citizens, public schools and perhaps even social services." A city or town considering annexing a nearby community typically takes that information into account.

Outside of metropolitan areas, another factor in a community's annexation chances is highway access – the closer the better.

"This makes sense and certainly fits with the notion of land speculation as one of the drivers of annexation, and with the theory of annexation as a tool for shoring up revenue streams and recapturing tax base," Wilson said.

Wilson and Edwards plan to continue their focus on annexation, and are in the early stages of examining voter registration and property value as factors in municipal underbounding.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Ethnicity doesn't seem to affect annexation decisions like race (2014, October 1)
retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-ethnicity-doesnt-affect-annexation-decisions.html>

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