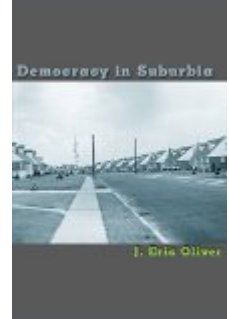


**J. Eric Oliver.** *Democracy in Suburbia*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001. xvi + 263 pp. \$47.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-08880-8.



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## Civic Engagement in Suburbia

For decades, critics have attacked suburbia as the source of all manner of modern ills. It supposedly has bred narrow-minded homogeneity, destroyed open fields and lush forests, imposed rows of look-alike houses on the landscape, locked women in a prison of domesticity, enslaved Americans to the automobile, and undermined the American dream of social justice for all. In *Democracy in Suburbia*, J. Eric Oliver considers yet another charge against the maligned suburbs, examining suburbia's impact on civic behavior. Has suburbanization produced a decline in civic participation? Has it bred an indifference, if not an aversion, to civic engagement essential to a vital democracy? These are the questions Oliver attempts to answer.

Oliver does so through statistical analysis, exploiting survey data from the 1990 Citizen Participation Study. This survey gathered data on civic behavior, asking participants whether they contacted local board officials, attended local government board meetings, attended civic organization meetings, engaged in informal civic activity, voted

in local elections, and felt they had any influence over local government officials. Applying multivariate regression analysis to these data, Oliver measures the relationship between these forms of civic participation and the size, wealth, economic diversity, and ethnic homogeneity of the incorporated municipalities in which the respondents lived. He finds that residents of small municipalities are more active in civic affairs than residents of larger cities. But Oliver's analysis reveals that economic and ethnic homogeneity negates the advantages of small size; residents of homogeneous municipalities have fewer incentives for participation. Lacking diversity, suburban municipalities grapple with fewer divisive issues. When they escape to homogeneous suburban municipalities, suburbanites therefore do not reap the democratic benefits of small-scale government. Instead, they avoid the civic issues of the metropolis and do not create a meaningful form of democracy. To solve this problem, Oliver proposes restructuring the government of suburbia, creating a two-tier metropolitan framework that preserves small municipalities but also provides an overarching re-

gional government to confront the broader issues of the diverse metropolis.

Though many readers might rally behind Oliver's conclusions, his seemingly sophisticated statistical analysis is based on a simplistic conception of suburban government that draws into question his efforts. Oliver's analysis assumes that the municipality is the only local government unit that molds a suburbanite's civic values and behavior; he relates civic attitudes and actions to the characteristics of the respondent's municipality but not to the characteristics of the respondent's other local government units. Yet suburbanites live in a variety of local governmental units, each of which are forums for participation and each of which potentially determines civic behavior and values. For example, in his first chapter, Oliver identifies Spring Valley, Texas, a small suburb of Houston, as the typical American town, a representative suburban municipality. Spring Valley is a community of 3,611 people, over 90 percent of them non-Hispanic whites. Moreover, over 90 percent of the housing units are owner-occupied. It is the stereotypical suburb, and in Oliver's analysis, the attitudes and actions of its residents would be regarded as characteristic of a small, homogeneous municipality. Yet the residents of Spring Valley are also residents of the Spring Branch Independent School District, encompassing 44 square miles and 188,000 residents, with a total of forty schools. Of the school district's almost 32,000 pupils, 48 percent are Hispanic, 39 percent non-Hispanic white, 7 percent Asian, and 6 percent black. In other words, Spring Valley residents are also participants in a large and ethnically heterogeneous unit of local government. Spring Valley's municipal government performs few functions, whereas the large diverse Spring Branch district provides the most significant and expensive local government service, the one with the greatest salience for the American people. More people select their place of residence on the basis of school district than municipality. Why wouldn't the civic values and behavior of these Texas suburbanites

reflect their experience as residents of the large, heterogeneous Spring Branch unit as opposed to the small, homogeneous Spring Valley unit? Isn't involvement in local government and local civic participation influenced by all the various units of local rule instead of just one?

The Spring Valley example, moreover, is not unique. Virtually every suburbanite is a resident of multiple local units, some large and some small, some heterogeneous and others homogeneous. Each unit potentially molds the suburbanite's values and behavior. Because suburban residents demand a quality of schooling available only in school districts with populations over 10,000, there are few districts as small as the municipality of Spring Valley. In the South, many school governments are countywide. Moreover, there are sprawling special districts whose boards are responsible for services vital to all suburbanites. Water, sewerage, library services, and even fire protection are often the responsibility of boards that oversee an area comprising many incorporated municipalities as well unincorporated areas. The Citizen Participation Study asked respondents whether they had attended a local governmental board meeting. Yet in suburban St. Louis County, Missouri, this could include attending a meeting of the county library board that provides library services to most of the 1,000,000 county residents, rich and poor, black and white, or a zoning board for a uniformly affluent municipality of a few thousand residents. Similarly, the survey asked how often the respondent had voted in the past five years for a local or city official. County officials are local officials, yet most suburbs are in counties with hundreds of thousands of residents. This question thus asked about voting participation in a very large local unit as well as a possibly small municipal one. The survey question on political efficacy asked whether a local government official would pay attention to the respondent's complaint about local government services. Residents of the incorporated homogeneous village of Garden City, New York, (popula-

tion 22,000) are also residents of the heterogeneous Town of Hempstead (population 700,000) and of Nassau County (population 1,300,000). Each of these units provides significant local government services to a Garden City resident. When answering the efficacy question, wouldn't a Garden City respondent consider not only the village councilor but also the town supervisor and the county legislator? The question thus measures the sense of efficacy when dealing with a variety of local governmental units with differing characteristics. Which suburban units are most salient in determining civic behavior? Aren't all of them influential? Why, then, assume that only the municipality is the maker of suburban political culture and that statistical analysis based on the characteristics of municipalities alone reveals the causes for a supposed lack of suburban civic virtue?

Suburbanites live simultaneously in small units and large ones. Suburban government is not simply a collection of walled municipalities, and studies that conceive of it as such might well prove misleading. We live in a nation with multi-tiered local government, divided functionally as well as geographically, not just the two-tiered alternative proposed by Oliver in his conclusion. If there is a lack of civic engagement in the suburbs, it may be less because of a lack of ethnic or economic diversity than because of an excessive diversity of local government units. Local government may be just too confusing. How can one attend a board meeting when it is so difficult to figure out which board is pertinent to one's problem?

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