

SOCIAL AND MEDIA INFLUENCES ON GROWTH ATTITUDES

WOODROW JONES, JR.

*Texas A&M University
College Station*

C. RICHARD HOFSTETTER

San Diego State University

ABSTRACT

Popular attitudes toward urban growth are influential in land use planning. This study explores the impact of the media and social factors in shaping growth attitudes. Several plausible explanations are explored given a telephone survey of 429 San Diego residents. Citizens awareness and information about growth appear to be enhanced with increased exposure to media, while social status suggests that restricted growth appears to have reached the status of "unitary ethos."

The cost of uncontrolled growth has been a primary cause of unhappiness among urban residents. Bigger has not always proven better; in fact, growth has often created more problems for city governments than it has solved. This has stemmed from a number of sources. Suburbanization of cities was fostered by the availability of cheap land and mass transportation. Fueling the mobility was the increased government mortgage and insurance program which allowed low cost housing to spread in suburban fringes, thereby increasing city size.

Popular attitudes toward urban growth may also be influential in land use planning. The preferences of urban residents can be a source of community conflict. Some argue that the adverse effects of urban growth are manifest in the decline of the quality of life. Others argue that growth is important for the expansion of the economy and the creation of employment opportunity. Between these poles there is a range of opinion which the governmental officials have to evaluate. Thus, citizen attitudes are indicative of the potential cleavages in a community.

The study of growth has centered around the legal and economic dimensions of growth management political differences of most issues. The myth of consensus and nonpartisanship in environmental politics has been dispelled by recent research. The purpose of this article is to test the impact of social and political dimensions on the growth issue.

BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS

The dynamics of size, growth, and citizens' attitudes about urban life have been of primary concern for the sociologist and the political scientist. Since Duncan posed the issue of "optimal size," many researchers have studied the contributory factors to growth and the ways of restricting growth effectively [1]. Recent investigators have centered on the public attitudes on growth as an environmental issue. The old arguments that "bigger is better" stem from the economic beliefs that population growth, economic development, and the elimination of poverty go hand-in-hand. This view holds that economic development presents a dilemma for environmental concerns. One cannot reduce income differential without an expanding economy; therefore, "non-growth" creates a cruel hoax which in effect "kicks the ladder down behind them" (the middle class), thus preventing lower class individuals from benefiting from economic expansion [2]. Further evidence of the strength of this argument is the trend toward new methods of exclusionary zoning and other practices to deny housing to the poor. Without adequate housing for the poor and a pool of available jobs, the possibility for the poor to enjoy the environment decreases [3].

Certain advantages can be seen in presenting the restrictive growth movement as an attempt to preserve the environment. First, by being presented as a movement to preserve the environment, restrictive growth zoning has gained a degree of respectability. Despite the broad legal issues of exclusionary and inclusionary zoning, right to travel and management, the restrictive growth movement has been portrayed as embracing the public interest. Second, the restrictive growth movement has an attitudinal base in American public opinion. A survey conducted in 1974 found that 364 cities had restricted growth through population ceilings, building permits, and moratoria on sewers and water hook-ups [4]. Further evidence of this empirical base are public opinion polls which indicate preferences for the small town environment. The Commission on Population Growth found that of 1,700 adults questioned, more than half of the respondents would prefer to live in a small town [5]. Another third indicated a preference for a small urban locale, and only 134 expressed a desire to live in a large city or suburbs. Stabler's study of growth attitudes in Illinois revealed that these attitudes reflect a general satisfaction of a no growth environment [6]. However, higher income households are less likely to favor further growth than middle income or low income households. Also, long term

residents tend to oppose new growth in comparison to newer residents. Newer residents were more concerned about the effects on public services since they migrated from urban areas.

Several different explanations have been suggested to explain public opinion on the growth and other environmental issues. Banfield and Wilson offer the ethos model as one plausible explanation of citizens' attitudes toward governmental policies [7]. This particular view dominates much of the research on citizens' attitudes despite the debate over the validity of the two policy perspectives suggested by the authors [8].

The first policy perspective, the unitary ethos ("public regardingness"), suggests that sharp differences in sentiment about controlled growth do not exist among segments of the community. Groups who are more peripheral to the social and political system and who might benefit from diminished controls of growth are only marginally less supportive of controlled growth policies than others [9]. The emphasis to these citizens is on good and efficient government rather than personal concerns [10].

The individualist ethos, "private regardingness," has the opposite policy perspective. This view suggests that attitudes toward growth are based on social class and not abstract entities [11]. Therefore, more affluent groups can afford to be more concerned about the environmental benefits of strict growth control policies. Groups who cannot afford the benefits of growth controls are less likely to support restricted growth, even if the quality of the environment suffers in the process of supplying these benefits.

A final alternative explanation of growth attitudes is from communication theory. Occasionally preferences emerge in communities which become so dominant that few members of the community challenge the prevailing view [12]. These views are infused throughout all strata of society by the mass media and take on a legitimacy of their own. Further, competing views are often relegated to the arena of "non-decisions" on the part of citizens and policy-makers [13]. Indeed, a "spiral of silence" may exist with respect to the guiding ethos of the community [14]. Thus, passive constraints are placed on the citizens' attitudes by the lack of alternative sources of information.

Communication media doubtlessly provide a major source of popular views about the growth question in the larger San Diego area. As a source of issue awareness, information, imagery, issue-agenda, and evaluations of what significance others have come to assert about controlling growth and public policies relating to controlled growth, the media are clearly likely to play major roles in influencing opinions of many in San Diego.

Mass and interpersonal communication media are assumed to establish a perceptual environment in which images, beliefs, and attitudes are developed [15]. People continuously form and modify such perceptions in terms of how their own experiences combine with portraits of reality painted by mass media [16, pp. 9-18; 17, pp. 287-290].

Communication media are assumed to be most influential under the following conditions: 1) when people have little direct experience with an event and when subjective agenda are not already highly structured [18, pp. 179-181]; 2) when a message is ambiguous and content is repetitive and frequent; 3) when attention to message content is high [19, pp. 160-162]; and 4) when messages are not aimed at changing existing attitudes but involve other kinds of impact such as providing information, modifying images in minor ways, and conveying emotive aspects which are not centrally linked to an attitude. Indeed, the latter consideration suggests the hypothesis that media are less likely to alter attitudes about growth than to raise information levels and popular awareness of growth issues [20].

Under a unitary model, exposure to communication media is expected to make little difference in attitude, since a broad consensus and high degree of definition exist on growth issues. Media exposure is, however, expected to increase popular levels of information. Greater latitude for varied media influences exist under an individualistic ethos, since the public is more heterogeneous on issues, greater definitional ambiguity is likely to exist, and more room for ignorance of issue positions is probable if not certain.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Data used in this analysis were drawn from a survey of San Diego County residents. San Diego has experienced both the positive and negative attributes of growth. Nestled in the southwestern-most corner of the nation and characterized by a fine climate, the region has experienced phenomenal growth during the last several decades. The neighboring city of Tijuana, Mexico, has experienced even more rapid growth during this period so that a vast megalopolis of nearly three million people exists in the San Diego-Tijuana area. Growth and control of growth for the sake of a variety of environmental ends, have typified political rhetoric in San Diego probably more than any other single issue. A telephone survey of 429 residents of the city and suburbs was conducted to elicit the dominant opinions on a variety of issues related to growth. A series of twenty-one items in Likert format was included in order to elicit respondents' attitudes about the consequences of growth for a variety of services, life style, and future effects. Other attitudes about growth and its implications were tapped through additional open and closed-ended questions.

Interviews were completed with approximately 70 percent of the eligible respondents contacted.¹ Scrutiny of marginal distributions for demographic

¹ Interviews were conducted by students in the author's classes after a period of careful training during spring, 1978. Close supervision, editing, and analysis were employed to assume reasonable levels of quality control. The sample was developed by using standard random-digit-dialing procedures.

variables revealed that the data reflected population parameters within acceptable bounds of sampling error, although there was some underrepresentation of Blacks and Chicanos. The measures were designed to ascertain individual perceptions and the sources of perceptions for a variety of growth related problems.

Factor analysis of the twenty-one items was used to test the overall dimensionality of the Likert items and to form a more general "growth scale." A principal component analysis of the twenty-one items revealed that a single factor accounted for about thirty-one percent of the total variance in the twenty-one items. A second component accounted for an additional 9 percent of the variance, while an additional three factors were extracted by the Kaiser criterion (associated eigenvalue greater than 1.0) and accounted for 6.5, 6.0, and 4.9 percent of the total variance, respectively. The large disparity in eigenvalues between the first and second factors suggests that the first factor represents a substantial portion of the common variance in the set of items, and that additional factors are much less general than the principal component. All items were loaded .34 or more on the principal component. The final analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Loadings for the Principal Component and Item Communalities

	<i>Loading First Component</i>	<i>h²</i>
Employment opportunities	.36	.67
Availability of housing	.42	.56
Air pollution	.60	.82
Water pollution	.64	.81
Crime	.64	.56
Educational opportunities	.45	.44
Public transportation, such as busses, cabs, trains	.35	.50
Garbage disposal	.65	.74
Sewage disposal	.67	.78
Recreational facilities	.54	.40
Traffic congestion	.68	.66
Preservation of wildlife	.59	.61
Quality of law enforcement	.60	.48
High taxes	.47	.40
Medical services	.55	.38
Quality of local neighborhoods	.64	.48
Responsiveness of government to people	.60	.66
People influencing government decisions	.45	.66
Being able to talk to public officials directly	.60	.59
Promoting good relations between racial groups	.50	.40
Overall quality of housing	.60	.58

A simplified index was formed from the nineteen items which loaded most heavily on the principal component by adding the scores of the individual items after missing data had been assigned the value of the item mean. Responses were weighted 1 for "better," 2 for "have no effect," and 3 for "worse," so that higher values on the index represent persons who were more likely to perceive unfavorable effects of restricting growth. The resulting index was then trichotomized and labeled the "growth index." Omitted from the index were "employment opportunities" and "public transportation," for the items least highly loaded on the factor.

FINDINGS

Preliminary Overview

Very few adults in San Diego advocate faster growth. Fewer than 8 percent favored "faster growth," while over 42 percent favored "restricting growth to an even greater extent." About 34 percent favored "retaining about the same rate of growth as now," while 12 percent reported not having thought about the issue, and 4 percent gave no response.

Public opposition to growth is also reflected in the fact that 50 percent could think of no "important reasons to allow rapid growth in the San Diego area." About 82 percent, moreover, failed to provide a second reason, and 96 percent failed to give three reasons to allow rapid growth. Jobs were, however, the most commonly expressed reason respondents mentioned to allow rapid growth.

In contrast, only 14 percent failed to mention a reason to "restrict rapid growth." About 58 percent failed to give two reasons and 84 percent failed to give three reasons to restrict growth. Respondents gave many specific reasons to restrict growth, but nearly all focused on the quality of the environment, including specific mention of "esthetics," "nature," "solitude," "congestion," and "traffic."

Despite strong support for restricting growth and opposition to faster growth, respondents held a diversity of views about the effects of "restricting the rate of growth" on various goods, services, and procedures. Distributions are presented in Table 2.

Restricting growth was viewed as improving air and water pollution, sewage disposal, traffic congestion, and preservation of wildlife by majorities of respondents. In no case did a majority believe that restricting growth would make any item "worse." And only in the areas of jobs, housing, and taxes did as many as 33 percent assert that restricting growth would result in worsened states.

Restricting growth was perceived as having no effect on a number of areas by large proportions of respondents. As many as one-third of the respondents mentioned education, transportation, garbage disposal, law enforcement, medical services, local neighborhoods, government responsiveness, popular

Table 2. Respondents' Views of the Impact of Restrictive Growth for Selected Goods, Services, and Procedures in San Diego^a

<i>Item</i>	<i>Response</i>			
	<i>Better Percent</i>	<i>No Effect Percent</i>	<i>Worse Percent</i>	<i>DK/NA Percent</i>
Employment opportunities	38.4	17.8	36.1	7.7
Availability of housing	37.0	19.2	36.3	7.4
Air pollution	63.0	18.7	12.5	5.8
Water pollution	57.4	23.8	11.8	7.0
Crime	44.0	28.7	16.9	10.5
Educational opportunities	40.7	34.7	12.5	12.1
Public transportation, such as busses, cabs, trains	38.0	39.4	12.5	10.2
Garbage disposal	44.0	38.4	9.7	7.9
Sewage disposal	50.0	29.4	12.5	8.1
Recreational facilities	49.3	32.2	10.2	8.4
Traffic congestion	59.7	21.1	12.7	6.5
Preservation of wildlife	57.6	23.8	7.2	11.4
Quality of law enforcement	44.4	38.4	8.1	9.0
High taxes	26.6	27.1	32.9	13.4
Medical services	36.6	42.6	10.0	10.9
Quality of local neighborhoods	46.8	33.8	8.6	10.9
Responsiveness of government to people	35.4	37.5	10.6	16.5
People influencing government decisions	33.1	40.5	10.2	16.2
Being able to talk to public officials directly	37.5	43.3	6.9	12.2
Promoting good relations between racial groups	40.3	38.9	10.0	10.9
Overall quality of housing	48.4	25.9	15.5	10.2

^a The question asked was: "Many people have also told us more specific things that may happen because of restricting growth in San Diego. As I read of these things, just tell me whether you personally think restricting the rate of growth will make things better, worse, or have no effect on things in San Diego." *N* = 429

influence, contacting officials, and racial relations in this regard. Relatively large proportions said that they did not know about areas concerning government.

Thus, it appears that support for restricting growth is overwhelming despite note being taken of worsened economic implications of restricting growth. A reasonable test of this assumption is the extent to which the general attitude about restricting growth is related to evaluations of specific effects of growth concerning the twenty-one items. Favoring faster growth is most highly

correlated with the view that restricting growth will worsen crime, taxes, housing, educational and occupational opportunities, transportation, sewer disposal, law enforcement, and medical services. However, none of the correlations is greater than .18, a correlation which explains but 3.2 percent of the variance. Few of the other correlations account for more than 1 percent of the variance in the relationship, and many for far less than 1 percent. Thus, it appears that the *general* attitude toward restricting growth is not based on perceptions of *specific* costs and benefits of controlling growth.

If general support for controlling growth is not related strongly to other attitudes about the effects of restricting growth, then neither is support for controlling growth related strongly to social and political variables. Standard measures of age, educational attainment, income, race, political involvement, party identification, and ideological identification failed to explain as much as 1 percent of the variation in general attitude about restricting growth. Measures of exposure to mass and interpersonal communication media also fail to explain much variation in attitude about growth, although the correlation between reported exposure to television news stories about development and attitude toward growth reached-.12 (the more exposed were more likely to favor rapid growth than others).

These findings support the unitary ethos model. Support for restricting growth in San Diego is extremely widespread. No sources of support for the growth issue, moreover, appear to be related to either social or political cleavages in San Diego. Only small minorities of all support faster growth in the area. Support for maintaining the *status quo* with regard to growth or restricting growth even more is pervasive throughout all strata of the society. No group mounts significant objection. Evidently, opposition to faster growth is so pervasive that alternative views have not been established effectively.

Multivariate Analysis

Two strategies of analysis were used to elaborate understanding of attitudes about growth in San Diego. The first involves use of communication media about the development issue. As noted, communication influences perceptions of reality and forms images and abstract ideas. The more divorced from the realm of immediate experience events are, the greater the influence of media is anticipated. Media exposure is assumed to reflect dominant views. This translates to supporting control of growth in San Diego. Thus, media exposure is hypothesized to lead to increased support for restricting growth.

Exposure to growth control issues through television programs, newspapers, and discussions with others is by no means pervasive. Only about 28 percent reported having seen three or more news stories on television concerning growth, and 11 percent reported having seen more than ten such stories.

Exposure to growth issues was greater in other media. About 18 percent reported having read more than ten stories "so far this year in local newspapers." An additional 17 percent reported reading three to ten newspaper stories.

Discussion of development was even more common. About 23 percent said that they had participated in more than ten discussions about the rate of growth "so far this year," and 25 percent had participated in three to ten discussions about growth. Intercorrelations among exposure to the development issue through television news, newspapers, and discussion were strong and positive (.50 or greater).

Relationships between exposure to mass media and general attitude about growth are weak at best. The greater the exposure to television news and newspaper stories about development, the more respondents supported faster growth. But correlations explain very little variation (-.12 and -.06 for television news and newspaper stories, respectively). Discussions about growth were only slightly (and not significantly) related to attitude about growth (.05), with increased discussion associated with support for faster growth.

The influences of media are partially dependent on the uses to which exposure is put. It is likely that those interested in public affairs use media to seek information about public issues to a greater extent than the less interested. On the other hand, television may have a greater influence on the so-called "inadvertent viewer," the person who becomes exposed to ideas without having defenses aroused. Correlations between exposure to TV news, newspaper stories, and conversations and attitude about growth for low, medium, and high levels of political interest are presented in Table 3.

The influence of mass and interpersonal media are partially contingent on political interest. Findings do not, however, support the inadvertent viewer model. There is little if any relationship among media exposure and position of the growth issue among the less interested.

Moderate correlations between exposure and attitude toward growth did, however, emerge among those with high levels of political interest, among those who are most likely to be actively seeking information. TV and newspaper exposure is, however, associated with support for more rapid growth, while discussion is associated with support for faster growth.

It appears information seekers may discover content discordant with dominant views from TV and newspaper coverage. Discussion, involving a social

Table 3. Correlations Between Media Exposure and Attitude about Growth Controlling for Level of Political Interest^a

<i>Exposure to:</i>	<i>Level of Political Interest</i>		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
TV News Stories	-.04	-.09	-.20
Newspaper Stories	.00	-.06	-.18
Conversations	.04	.03	.11

^a Numbers are product-moment correlations between exposure variables and attitude about growth within each category of interest. Negative correlations occur when increased exposure is associated with support for faster growth.

context, appears to reinforce opposition to growth among the highly interested. Perhaps processes of social selectivity are involved in reinforcing dominant views in ways that mass media are not.

A second role that media of communication often play involves creation of awareness of issues and providing information which can then be used to bolster attitudinal positions. Two measures were derived from the twenty-one items about the effects of development. First, for each respondent, the number of "DK" responses were tabulated. The resulting index was then trichotomized, forming an "index of non-position taking." An "index of issue neutrality" was formed similarly by summing the number of "no effect" responses to the twenty-one items and then trichotomizing the results.

The two scales bear a moderate association with general attitudes about growth. Advocates of removing restrictions against growth were more likely than others to state "DK" to evaluations of specific effects of restricting the rate of growth. Among those advocating faster growth, for instance, 33 percent were high on the index of non-position taking, while 25 percent of those advocating slower growth and 22 percent of those advocating the same rate of growth were characterized by similar positions on the index.

Advocates of lower growth were least likely and advocates of the *status quo* most likely to be high on the index of issue neutrality. Only 27 percent of the slower growth advocates, contrasted to 43 percent of the same growth advocates, were very likely to assert that restricting growth would have "no effect" on items (i.e., to be high on the issue neutrality scale). At the same time, 33 percent of those advocating faster growth were characterized as high on the scale. Although relationships are not significant (at the .05 level) in a statistical sense; they do suggest the relative intensity among the proponents of controlled growth in San Diego.

This interpretation is supported by the moderately consistent, if extremely weak and statistically insignificant, associations between exposure to media and a tendency to perceive restricting growth as having *some* effect on each of the twenty-one items. The nature of the effect, especially once variance explained is considered, is so modest as to be ignored in practical terms. TV news exposure to programs about growth was correlated $-.14$ with the index on non-position taking. Exposure to newspaper stories and to conversations about growth were correlated $-.12$ and $-.05$, respectively, with the index.

At the same time correlations between each of the exposure variables and the index of issue neutrality were zero. Thus, media appear to provide information to aid in taking some kind of position, but media do not appear to support the *status quo* position with regard to growth. Although correlations are extremely weak, these data support an agenda setting interpretation of the media; they teach people not what to think, but what to think about.

Analysis of Effects of Restricting Growth

Although only very weak relationships have been found between a general attitude toward growth and perceptions of the effect of restricting growth on twenty-one specific items, it is always possible that inability to find more robust relationships are due to error in measurement. Unreliability tends to reduce correlations which otherwise exist. Single-item indicators are notoriously unreliable. Particular groupings of items, especially according to undimensional criteria, will increase validity in measurement by grouping items which "fit together" along a single continuum.

The growth index was correlated at a higher level with general attitude toward growth (.19) than with any of the component items of the index.² But the only other variable with which the growth index was correlated more than marginally was age. Older San Diegans were somewhat more likely to see adverse consequences stemming from growth than were others.

Thus, even when all items were combined in a more reliable index of growth two findings appear to recur. First, the general attitude toward growth fails to account for more specific appraisal of the consequences of restricting growth to a large extent. This implies that the general attitude is not merely a consequence of more specific appraisals. Second, both general and specific attitudes are weakly correlated at best with social and political variables. Cleavages which prove divisive about other considerations apparently do not divide groups on the issue of growth.

CONCLUSION

Little evidence in support of either an individualist or unitary self-interest model was discerned in this far-ranging analysis of the correlates of general and specific attitudes about controlling development in the San Diego area. Only a small minority favors faster growth in the area. Few see benefits to less restricted growth; fewer see a connection between costs and benefits of restricted growth and a more general attitude about growth. Communication media do play a role in the formation of attitudes about growth in American communities. But it appears that the role is that of enforcing existing propensities. In the case of San Diego, that means opposition to growth possibly increases with exposure. More important, media dispell ignorance about the issues. Levels of popular awareness and information about growth appear to be

² Correlations between the growth index and a series of other variables were as follows: length of residence in San Diego .06, age .16, education .08, income .04, race .07, political involvement .04, party identification -.02 (self-identified), ideology .01, total television exposure -.00, exposure to local television news -.01, newspaper stories about growth .04, local newspaper stories about growth .02, and conversations about growth -.03. Except for age, none of the variables explained as much as 1 percent of the variation in the growth index.

enhanced, however modestly, with increased exposure to media messages about the growth issue.

Citizens apparently do not act out of economic and social self-interest; nor do groups of community conservationists support controlled growth in the face of widespread opposition for the general improvement of the community. Opposition to the control is not widespread. Indeed, opposition to growth control is largely silent, and restricted growth appears to have reached the status of a unitary ethos in San Diego.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Prof. Woodrow Jones, Jr.
Department of Political Science
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843-4348