

A COUNTY EXECUTIVE: TO BE OR NOT TO BE
IN TOMPKINS COUNTY
An Empirical Examination of Key Issues

by

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What is the Issue?

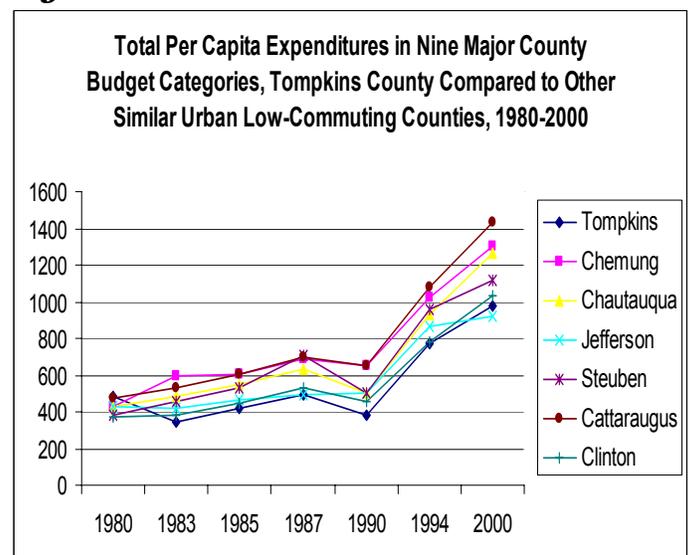
The issue in this report is whether a County Executive form of government is more efficient and democratic than a Legislature-Administrator form of county government. Two major criteria for determining the answer to this issue can be phrased in terms of efficiency and democracy. The question, then, is, "Is having a County Executive a more efficient and democratic form of government than other forms of county government, such as the "County Legislature with County Administrator" form now in Tompkins County?" We compare Tompkins County with Chemung and Chautauqua Counties, which have a County Executive form of government. These three counties are all relatively low-commuting counties with a relatively large county seat and populations in the 100,000 person range. We also examined efficiency and democracy trends with five other counties that are similarly low-commuting with larger county seats and in a similar population range.

Extent of Efficiency

On the issue of efficiency, most people probably believe that a lower property tax levy would demonstrate a more efficient county government. Property taxes, however, are only one form of local taxation. Sales taxes represent another major form. An alternative way to think about county government efficiency is to examine comparative per capita expenditures on basic budget items. The data are most comparable for the nine services of: social services [economic assistance to children and families], education, health,

transportation, culture and recreation, general administration, police, public safety, and fire services. In fact, for comparative purposes, per capita expenditures on these 9 budget categories are probably more realistic than tax rates in getting at a county's efficiency. County Legislatures spend a great deal of time poring over budgets of individual departments and their administrative implications in trying to keep expenditures to a minimum, whereas tax rates are calculated only after this tedious process.

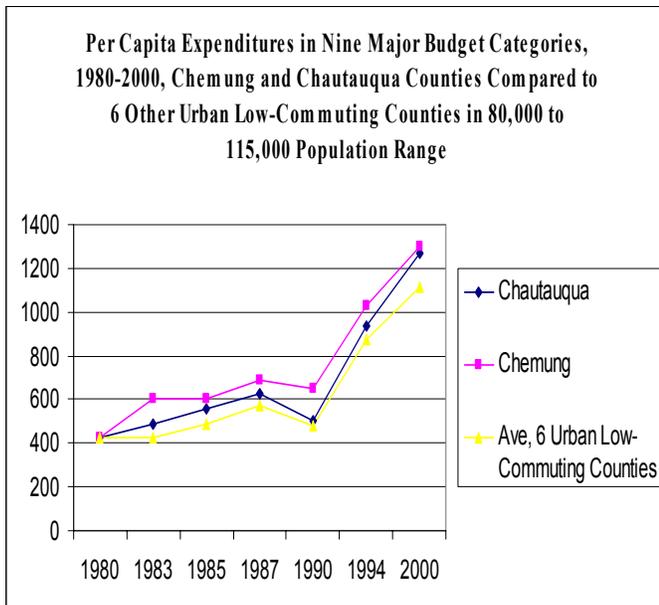
Figure 1.



The findings show that the County Executive form of government is consistently less efficient than three of the four other counties with the Legislature-Administrator form of county. The average total per capita

expenditures among counties with Legislature-Administrator forms of government fall below the totals of the two comparable counties with a County Executive form of government. Figure 2 aggregates the findings for six comparable counties with a Legislature-Administrator form of government, further reinforcing this finding.

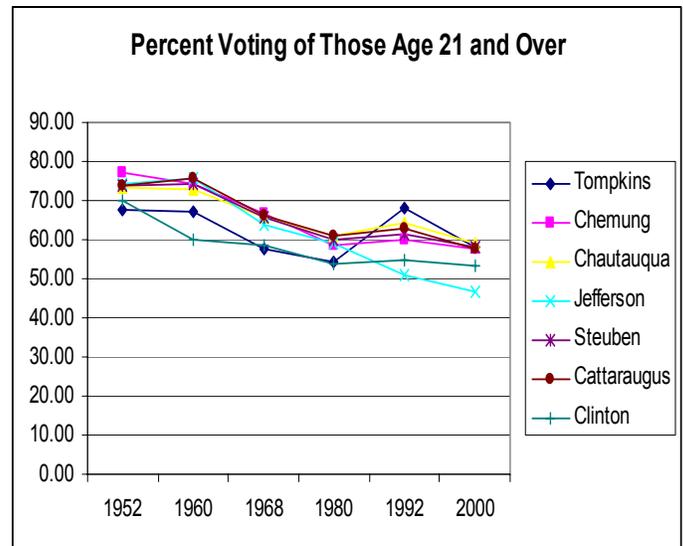
Figure 2:



Extent of Democracy

Is a County Executive form of government more democratic than a Legislature-Administrator form? This issue is also complex, largely because of the numbers of ways by which to define democracy. One definition on which most analysts agree is that a more democratic government is based on greater participation in elections. While an ideal way by which to indicate greater participation in elections would be the extent to which people participate in elections for county government, these data are very difficult to collect from one county to another. Thus, we substitute a proxy measure, voting in Presidential elections.

Figure 3:



Tompkins County lagged considerably behind the other comparable counties in percentage voting from 1952 to 1980, but in 1992 exceeded those of the other counties. In 2000 the percentage voting in Tompkins was exceeded slightly by Chautauqua County, thus putting these two counties in a virtual tie in their participation rates. In any case, it was not clear that Chemung and Chautauqua Counties, the two counties with County Executives, had better performance ratings in the percentages voting than the other counties in this comparison.

Conclusions

On the basis of these findings, the County Legislature-Administrator form of government appears more efficient in per capita expenditures than the County Executive form of government. However, the Legislature-Administrator form of government appears to be equally democratic as the County Executive form with regard to the percentages of adults voting in Presidential elections. We believe this analysis demonstrates that there is no clear reason for a county to move toward a County Executive form of county government. Indeed, the findings on the efficiency criterion of per capita expenditures probably represent at least one good reason not to do so.

