

THE POWER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A CASE STUDY OF ROCKBRIDGE
COUNTY'S HIGH SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

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Abstract

Local government policies are far reaching and have a greater impact upon the lives of citizens than the state or national governments on a regular basis. This theory is examined through a case study of Rockbridge County, Virginia, where in the early 1990s the county board of supervisors decided to consolidate their three high schools, effectively removing socialization centers in the towns of Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield. This case study looks at the impact of consolidation on these communities, the influence local print media had on civic engagement throughout public deliberations, and how the policy process at the local level differs from the national level. Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield both suffered from losing their high schools, seeing muted improvements and even decline in business diversity, the student dropout rate, household income, and voter turnout compared to other regions in the county. Despite over two years of coverage, *The News Gazette* did not generate increased voter turnout in the referendum on consolidation compared to state level house of delegates elections. Yet, because of the dynamics of the local policy process, local stakeholders were best equipped to influence consolidation policy. The controversial issue of consolidation hit communities at their core, yet generated below average engagement. The founding fathers' goal with federalism requires the people to engage with all levels of government—local, state, and national—to prevent tyranny ensure their rights and liberties are preserved.

Readers

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Introduction

The national focus on government policy has shifted towards national events and away from local and state decisions. During President Obama's administration, American media focused intensely on the impending changes of the Affordable Care Act and the new Common Core education curriculum. After President Trump's election, political discourse has been centered around the findings and implications of the Special Counsel, and the impact Donald Trump will have on national politics now and after his presidency. While events like these do have broad implications and affect millions of Americans, the core make-up of their daily lives is largely unchanged. Local government decisions, in contrast, have a more profound impact on the lives of American citizens. Even though their area of control is limited, city councils and boards of supervisors make decisions around zoning, school districts, internet access, water quality, and other issues that fundamentally shape and affect our daily lives.

The American people and our media coverage need to focus on local government decisions. Under a federal system, with a separation of powers and decentralized government, it makes sense that local government policy has the greatest effect on everyday life. However, with America's attention primarily on questioning the Trump presidency's legitimacy, local decisions are more likely to "fly under the radar." In reality, the people and media sources have more power in the policy process of local government than at the federal level. News coverage of more localized decisions may not necessarily increase political engagement, but it can help shape the development of policy as proposals are released to inform the people. Former House Speaker Tip O'Neill claimed that "all politics is local." The events that affect our everyday life shape our political inclinations. Matching our attention to local government policy with its true importance

can help ensure policy goes through extensive deliberation and is subject to reason rather than ride on the tide of the political passions of a given day or generation.

This paper examines how much local government policy can affect the lives of its constituents in the form of a multi-layered case study. All chapters connect to the issue of consolidating the high schools in the city of Lexington, Virginia and surrounding Rockbridge County. The first chapter looks at the aftermath of consolidation, noting that local communities where high schools were shuttered faced decline or limited growth compared to other regions studied. It considers changes in income, educational attainment, dropout rate, business diversity, and voter turnout. The second chapter examines the weekly publications of *The News Gazette*, the primary newspaper in the Lexington and Rockbridge County area. The rate of coverage, letters to the editor, and frequency of related community events about consolidation, leading up to a related referendum, is compared to similar articles, letters, and rallies leading up to local House of Delegates elections. This study reveals that increased coverage of an issue does not necessarily result in increased civic engagement. The final chapter compares the federal policy process and the influence of its actors, as described by John Kingdon, to the process and actors that surrounded Lexington and Rockbridge's school consolidation, finding that outsiders, including media and the electorate, have greater influence on policy at the local level than on federal policy. These chapters help conclude the importance of civic engagement at the local level because of how local policy can so fundamentally affect the lives of its constituents and their communities.

The National Sphere versus the Local Sphere

The two primary perspectives surrounding government action, from the local level to the national level, are progressivism and constitutionalism. The progressive movement called for an increasing the powers of government so that it could adequately address modern problems. This view generally supports an expansive national government, but variants of this view include powerful state governments as well. On the other hand, a constitutionalist view prioritizes individual liberty, relying on the perspectives of the Founding Fathers and their reasoning for the principle of Federalism.

Progressivism: Enhancing Government Power

The end of progressivism is to reach historical conclusion, where there is no conflict or antagonism because all are a part of this coherent and organized community that supports all members and acts in the interest of the whole. John Dewey referred to this ideal as “The Great Community”. In essence, individualist motives of all are shed away for the common good.¹ The premise of this belief is that individualism and independent thought and action are harmful, regardless of intent, to the development and progress of society and other human beings.² Dewey theorized a process, which he called “The Great Society”, to facilitate American society out of the age of nature and into “the Machine Age”, where the people become more socially aware and begin to contribute towards “the Great Community.”³ Dewey acknowledged that the Great Society may need to act coercively to meet its aim, stating “When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not its despotic master.”⁴ Essentially, to

¹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927): 184.

² *Ibid*, 101 & 102.

³ *Ibid*, 98 & 184.

⁴ *Ibid*, 184.

achieve perfect social cohesion with a purely common interest, strong coercive national government will be necessary to condition people for that end.

The means of progressivism were exemplified through the expansion of the national government through the programs of The New Deal, under President Franklin Roosevelt, and The Great Society, under President Lyndon B. Johnson. These programs gave to the rise and maturation of the Administrative State. In his first inaugural address, FDR called upon the people to be a “trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress is made, no leadership becomes effective.”⁵ For centralized government to work, compliance was necessary. Instead of free citizens with independent thought, Americans were to become subordinate soldiers for the government’s will. FDR’s vision for this expanded government were rights to a decent home, medical care, employment, education, food, and industry, saying “All of these rights spell security”.⁶ Liberty and individual freedom were passed over for ensuring specific quantifiable social outcomes. Johnson’s Great Society was an expansion of this. He presented the modern problems that require government action: “the decay of the centers and the despoiling of the suburbs. There is not enough housing for our people or transportation for our traffic. Open land is vanishing and old landmarks are violated. Worst of all expansion is eroding the precious and time-honored values of community with neighbors and communion with nature.”⁷ These predicate the necessity for government action and bringing security, calling the people to submit to an administrative will. Johnson’s

⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *First Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1933.

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/first-inaugural-address-4/>.

⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *State of the Union Address*, January 11, 1944.

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/state-of-the-union-address-3/>.

⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Great Society Speech*, May 22, 1964.

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/great-society-speech/>.

repetitive “will you join” questions suggest the government is moving forward with his Great Society regardless of the people’s opinion.⁸

Securing economic or social outcomes is the hallmark of progressive policy, opening the door to expansive government that ignores individual liberties. In the field of education, the urgency of the Cold War’s Space Race exemplifies the impact of expansive will-driven government. James Conant’s *The American High School Today*, a seminal piece for coerced school consolidation, was quickly published to help spur a response to the Russian’s launching of Sputnik.⁹ States began mandating consolidating school districts to increase student populations healthy enough to support diverse academic programs, to the point where the number of school districts in the United States dropped nearly 90 percent between 1920 and 1970.¹⁰ The educational and social pillars for thousands of American communities were eviscerated merely to outdo Russia’s astronomical feats.

For the progressive theorist, a powerful national government is necessary, because the will of individuals may not stand in the way of the moral will or common good. This creates government with broad limitations, allowing rights only to the extent of helping bring the Great Community to fruition.

Constitutionalism’s Emphasis on Liberty

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Robert L. Hampel, “The American High School Today: James Bryant Conant’s Reservations and Reconsiderations.” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 64, no. 9 (May 1983): 608-610. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20386830>.

¹⁰ James Conant, *The American High School Today*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959).; Christopher Berry, “School Consolidation and Inequality,” *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* no. 9. (2006): 49. accessed September 15, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067277>.; Thomas A. Lyson, “What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York.” (Report to the National Science Foundation, Cornell University, April 2002): 1, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED464777.pdf>.

The principle of Federalism is key to preserving individual freedoms and a government that respects them. In Federalist no. 46, Madison elaborates:

“The federal and State governments are in fact but different agents and trustees of the people, constituted with different powers and designed for different purposes. The adversaries of the Constitution seem to have lost sight of the people altogether in their reasonings on this subject; and to have viewed these different establishments not only as mutual rivals and enemies, but as uncontrolled by any common superior in their efforts to usurp the authorities of each other. These gentlemen must here be reminded of their error. They must be told that the ultimate authority, wherever the derivative may be found, resides in the people alone, and that it will not depend merely on the comparative ambition or address of the different governments whether either, or which of them, will be able to enlarge its sphere of jurisdiction at the expense of the other.”¹¹

For Madison, arguments over whether a political power belongs to the state or local government is the wrong question. Instead, the most important question of any government action is whether it impedes upon the liberties of the people. This reasoning also suggests that federalism can be violated in multiple directions, and from all levels of government. His comment on the “comparative ambition” of the levels of government relates to his discussion of factions in Federalist no. 10, where Madison argues the principle of federalism is what preserves liberty despite passionate, majority driven interests. In terms of representation, he notes “there is a mean, on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie. By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representative too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects.”¹² The solution to this is multiple levels of government with their own powers. “The federal constitution forms a

¹¹ James Madison, “Federalist No. 46,” <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/federalist-no-46/>.

¹² James Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/federalist-no-10/>.

happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests, being referred to the national, the local and particular to the state legislatures.”¹³ Essentially, a strong system of federalism, according to Madison, will preserve individual liberty. When the national, state, and local governments have limited and clearly defined powers, they do not have the standing to remove the people’s rights. However, when these levels of government seek to gain jurisdiction or power over another level of government, then liberties are revoked as governments pursue an interest other than the source of authority, being the people.

The effects of local government’s ignorance of federalism can be particularly problematic. Alexis DeTocqueville warned,

“When tyranny establishes itself within a small nation, it is more troublesome than anywhere else; acting inside a smaller circle, it extends to everything within this circle. Unable to undertake some great objective, it is busy with a multitude of small ones; it appears both violent and meddle-some. From the political world, which is strictly speaking its domain, it penetrates into private life. After dictating actions, it aspires to dictate tastes; after governing the State, it wishes to govern families.”¹⁴

Because local governments are the most directly connected to the people, it is easy for their actions to interfere with the rights and liberties of their citizens. Clint Bolick examined this in *Grassroots Tyranny*, and noted how both the ailments of national and local government functions are rooted in deviating from the principle of federalism.

Bolick’s critique of progressivism and “states’ rights liberalism” aligns with Madison’s view that conflicting interests over the powers of national and state government miss the bigger

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Alexis DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by Eduardo Nolla, trans. by James T Schleifer, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010): 256. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-democracy-in-america-historical-critical-edition-vol-4>.

question of whether the power in question violates individual liberty.¹⁵ He asserts that the expansion of government through the New Deal and the Great Society have contributed to the demise of federalism, resulting in similar violations at the local level where: Governing officials use their positions for their own interests, the local government officials place their values over the values of individual constituents, local government “interferes with voluntary, nonharmful economic activities” to benefit only a select group of constituents, and local government violates basic constitutional rights: from free speech to illegal search and seizure.¹⁶ These violations have left little room for the people to act without government. Bolick claims, “local governments...do everything from operating cable television stations and sewage treatment facilities to imposing rent control and taking positions on foreign policy issues. Virtually no aspect of moral, social, economic, or political life in America today is beyond the scope of local government.”¹⁷

Even worse, Bolick cites the random nature of local government jurisdictions. The local government and communities are at odds with each other.

“Communities are by their very nature formed around individuals who choose to create or join them. Local governments, conversely, are political entities whose jurisdictions are often arbitrary. The Hallmark of community is voluntarism. In a true community, rules are set by mutual consent. As a result, individuals within communities may establish whatever rules they wish, because every member is free to choose whether or not to be a member of that community. On the other hand, government has coercive powers that do not rely on unanimous consent. To keep these powers in check, government in the American natural law tradition is supposed to respect fundamental individual rights. No matter how strong the consensus, there are certain limits of individual autonomy that government is bound to respect, at least theoretically.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Clint Bolick, *Grassroots Tyranny: The Limits of Federalism*, (Washington D.C.: The Cato Institute, 1993): 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 97.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 95.

local government actions rarely amount to the consensus of a community interest. Often, local government decisions affect multiple different communities that have different sets of values. Finding consensus is especially challenging at the local level, and thus policies tend to be coercive rather than constructive. This is especially concerning when local governments can affect nearly every aspect of constituents' lives. Individual liberty becomes cast aside for control even by the level of government most accessible to the people.

Constitutional originalists believe that the core idea around America's government is individual liberty. Federalism was a mechanism to limit government power from encroaching upon the rights of the people. Through the expansion of government, the argument has shifted from whether a policy protects the rights of the people, to which level of government should have that power. This has proliferated through all political issues including education. No longer are schools community driven, but they are part of the state employment system and are subject to local government budget allocations and state standards. Many school districts have been shuttered for saving costs and ensuring a diverse and robust range of programs. Progressives argue this is a necessary part of the process for securing the social end—shedding people's self-interest for the moral good. Yet, the control of education, to the point where policy changes can harm communities, defies the ideals of individual liberty our founding fathers have sought to protect.

Local Decision-making:
How Kingdon's View of Policy Actors Compares to the Local Sphere

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Public Institutions and the Policy Process

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Introduction

When the citizens, school board, and board of supervisors of Rockbridge County considered, deliberated, and implemented a consolidation of the public high schools, numerous interests impacted the process and outcome. People voiced their concerns through *The News Gazette*, the only newspaper that covered the area. Some organized in political groups and presented demands to the school board and board of supervisors. The county school board was the first institution to propose consolidation and to discuss alternatives to the proposed policy.

While policy models identify how different groups fill roles in the policy process, Kingdon's *Agenda's, Alternatives, and Public Policies* assesses the extent of the impact various government groups have upon agenda setting and clarifying alternatives. Kingdon goes to great lengths on the specific impact of groups in a federal setting—describing the abilities the Presidency and Congress have on setting the political agenda and defining alternatives and the impact outside forces, such as interest groups, the media, and local stakeholders have on these agenda items.¹⁹ However, this analysis is out of touch with the local government policy process. Not only is the structure of the branches of government different at the local level than at the state and federal levels, but access to the public sphere is different as well, giving different groups, such as the media and interest groups, the ability to more effectively outline alternatives. In the local government sphere, the influence of the electorate is enhanced through referendums, and the influence of the media grows when it is closely connected to the electorate. On the other hand, the ability of the executive, in this case the board of supervisors, to shape alternatives, is greatly hindered, leaving most authority in that sphere to the school board.²⁰

¹⁹ John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, (Glenview: Pearson, 2011): 21-70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; *The News Gazette*, Lexington Va., 1967-1989.

The policy process at the local government level gives greater influence to outside forces while flipping the roles of the executive and legislative branches in agenda setting and formulating alternatives. An analysis of Rockbridge County's high school consolidation process shows how the board of supervisors had predominantly a financial role, the school board set the agenda, local stakeholders held the final say through a referendum, local print media had virtually a monopoly on public information, and interest groups had a profound influence on consolidation alternatives. These points are then compared to Kingdon's model to show how the policy process is different at the local level compared to his observations at the federal level.

Policy Models: Assessing the Influence of Political Actors

Political process theories focus on the procedure for policy development and which actors have power within the procedure. One school of thought is New Institutionalism, which characterizes most political actors with the freedom to act and influence society. This contrasts with preceding theories that focused more on "moral individualism" and outside factors upon politics rather than the actors.²¹ For example, Kingdon's study on the impact of actors on policy assumes a New Institutionalism approach. He focuses on how individual actors affect the policy process via agenda setting and framing alternatives.²² A contrasting position would be the Garbage Can model, as it takes a more haphazard approach, limiting the capabilities of actors to within the parameters of specific circumstances, opportunities, events from outside the government's framework, and frequent changes within the bureaucratic workforce and

²¹ James C. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (September 1984): 734, 738.

²² Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*: 21-70.

structure.²³ While there is a theoretical argument on whether actors hold significant influence in agenda setting, there are more fractures present within New Institutionalism regarding which actors hold different powers in the policy process.

The Executive Branch: The Tactical Versus Managerial President

There are two views of the Presidency regarding agenda setting. One sees a tactical President that is the prime agenda setter who determines the top issues to be addressed. The other views the President as largely managerial, losing much of their influence while gaining effectiveness as he continues to adjust to executive office. Kingdon's position is in line with a tactical president. While he points out the premise in Light's *The President's Agenda* that Presidents lose some of their agenda setting capabilities after an initial honeymoon period, he still calls the President the top agenda setter.²⁴ For example, Kingdon explains President Carter's ability to set the stage for policy change in trucking deregulation in 1979 despite the fact it was near the end of Carter's first term.²⁵ Kingdon determined that the President and his administration hold a heavy hand over agenda setting even after the initial year of a President's term in office. In contrast, Paul Light in *The President's Agenda* describes a President's term as two simultaneous cycles, one of decreasing influence and another of increasing effectiveness.²⁶ Essentially, towards the beginning of a President's term, the President has control over setting the agenda. Congress is willing to follow his lead. As elections approach and mistakes in developing and implementing policy become apparent, Congress begins to stop following the

²³ March and Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," 746.; Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*: 84-86.

²⁴ Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*: 21, 23, 26.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

²⁶ Paul C. Light, *The President's Agenda*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University: 1999): 36-37.

President's lead rendering him less able to set the agenda.²⁷ Both Light and Kingdon attribute agenda setting power to the Presidency. However, they differ in how long this power lasts, with Kingdon describing it as a hallmark of the office and with Light claiming there are high and low tides to presidential influence. Their agreement that executive leadership provides for the power to set the agenda is applied to the local governing structure of Rockbridge County to see how this perspective fits local government operation.

The Legislative Branch: One of Many

The debate concerning the legislative branch rests in the extent of its agenda setting power. Namely, does the large diverse body that is congress have the ability to set the stage for proposing policy. Walker believes that congressmen do set the agenda. He provides a case in automobile safety where senators took the lead in devising and promoting policy change.²⁸ However, he recognizes congress' agenda setting power is limited, pointing to how a body of 535 congressmen result in a competition to have certain policy proposals heard and pursued.²⁹ Kingdon does agree with Walker that congress does have the potential to set the agenda. However, controversial issues tend to be avoided because they could harm a congressman's reputation.³⁰ He also points out that the influence of interest groups, the sheer number of individual agendas, intense coverage by the media, and lack of control over policy implementation renders congress better suited for framing alternatives.³¹ While there is agreement that congress can potentially set the agenda, there is disagreement as to how often that

²⁷ *Ibid*, 38.

²⁸ Jack L. Walker, "Setting the Agenda in the U.S. Senate: A Theory of Problem Selection," *British Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 4 (October 1977): 432-435.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 426.

³⁰ Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 36, 38.

³¹ *Ibid*, 34.

can occur, with Walker providing case examples and Kingdon delineating a long list of impediments. Because setting the agenda is a challenge for congress, it is better suited for outlining alternative proposals and advocating for different interests in the policy process. This perspective will also be applied to the operations of local government of Rockbridge County, weighing Kingdon's observation of congress with the local school board during consolidation.

Outsiders

Kingdon acknowledged that outsiders do influence the policy process. That influence however, varied depending on the outside group. Kingdon believed media sources had little influence in agenda setting because they present information after events have already taken place.³² In contrast, Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder found that media coverage could increase the perceived importance of an issue if that issue was given extensive, targeted coverage.³³ When successfully implemented, such a media strategy would greatly affect the electorate and could set the political environment that would bring interest groups and politicians to deliberation and alternative framing in reaction to a new agenda.³⁴ Interest groups are another debate altogether. Kingdon sees interest groups particularly influential in periods of low partisanship.³⁵ Moe's Structural Choice Theory and Sabatier's Advocacy Coalitions both extend the influence of interest groups to even periods of high partisanship. Structural Choice Theory asserts congress has to be responsive to interest groups' wishes. Sabatier's Advocacy Coalitions argues that the

³² *Ibid*, 58-59, 61.

³³ Shanto Iyengar, Mark D. Peters, and Donald R. Kinder, "Experimental Demonstrations of the "Not-so-Minimal" Consequences of Television News Programs," *The American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (December 1982): 852.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 855.

³⁵ Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 46-47.

conflicting interests and shifting realignment of coalitions among interest groups and the actors they support are what shift the agenda as groups engage in a power struggle. Thus, Sabatier theory gives coalitions agenda setting power over the interest groups or politicians themselves.³⁶ Since different outsiders engage with congress and the executive in different ways, it is impossible to lump together the power of different outsiders on the policy process. They all have varying amounts of influence that is situationally based. If Kingdon's theory applies at the local government level, then since consolidation was a high profile, passionate issue for local stakeholders and local government officials, outsiders would have minimal impact in the Rockbridge case, with the referendum being a major exception. Additionally, the media would have a limited impact as it reports news after the fact, rather than influencing actors regarding an ongoing policy.

Methodology

This study examines the roles the Rockbridge County school board, board of supervisors, local media, electorate, and interest groups had in setting the agenda and proposing alternatives to the consolidation of high schools in Rockbridge County and the City of Lexington. This is done by comparing the actions each group took in the policy development process through the lens of *The News Gazette* articles and a few meeting minutes of the County Board of Supervisors. Unfortunately, the meeting minutes of the school board between 1985 and 1995 are missing from the Rockbridge County school board's records. Thus, *The News Gazette* is the only prevalent primary resource for examining the impact of these groups. The board of supervisors would only act after deliberation and decision making by the school board to approve or deny

³⁶ Edella Schlager and William Blomquist, "A Comparison of Three Emerging Theories of the Policy Process," *Political Research Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (September 1996): 656-658.

school board decision-making, therefore supervisor records on the consolidation policy are sparse.

Rockbridge County's consolidation process exemplifies the trend of school consolidation during the 20th century. From 1920 to 1970, 90 percent of school districts were lost to consolidation.³⁷ The use of a referendum to approve the policy was uncommon, but not unique in handling this policy situation. Local control of schools was a large issue, especially to communities that risked losing their schools to a consolidation.³⁸

This case provides a good opportunity to compare Kingdon's analysis of the role groups have in the policy process to the local level. It is an extensively documented, long lasting issue, originating in 1967 and coming up perennially until final approval in 1989. Numerous actors in the policy process were covered by *The News Gazette*, and because of the small size of the community, many were able to express their opinion on the consolidation issue.

After comparing the groups actions to the extent of influence Kingdon asserts, I assess which institutions and groups had an increase or decrease in power over the policy process. This will determine the validity of Kingdon's claims at the local level.

Rockbridge County's Consolidation Process

Because the structure of local county governance is not identical to the structure of the Federal and State governments, it is essential to identify roles as necessary. For the sake of simplicity, the county Board of Supervisors will be considered equivalent to the executive

³⁷ Christopher Berry, "School Consolidation and Inequality," *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* no. 9. (2006): 49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067277>. 49.; Thomas A. Lyson, "What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York." (Report to the National Science Foundation, Cornell University, April 2002): 1, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED464777.pdf>.

³⁸ Campbell F. Scribner, *The Fight for Local Control: Schools, Suburbs, and American Democracy*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2016) 36-38, 179.; Campbell F. Scribner, "'Culture Wars' in the Countryside: The Fight for Rural Schools." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 95, no.2 (Winter 2011/2012): 20.

branch, the school board and other local agencies will be treated as the legislative, while the press, interest groups, and the electorate will be given the same distinction that Kingdon prescribes for federal level policy making. The Rockbridge County high school consolidation process will be the framework in which the actors are observed in their authority and influence upon the policy process.

Board of Supervisors

The Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors are the final approval for policy decisions after county boards—such as the school board—propose them and give preliminary approval. This is evident in their predominantly hands-off approach to consolidation. Most coverage of the board of supervisors was regarding the approval of school board action, making agreements with Lexington’s City Council, and calling for a referendum.³⁹

While the Board of Supervisors did request for the original study to consolidate schools in 1967, that was only in conjunction with the City Council of Buena Vista, Va.⁴⁰ From there, the supervisors only discussed consolidation when presented with a proposal by the school board. The Board of Supervisors approved a referendum in 1974 and another one in 1989.⁴¹ They also handled agreements on how the new school would be financially supported and maintained.⁴² The Board of Supervisors’ authority to set the agenda was limited.

With the bulk of the supervisors’ power in the financial aspects of consolidation, framing alternatives seemed to be their predominant mark on the policy process. The supervisors’ actions

³⁹ “Supervisors Threaten to Block School Board Move,” *The News Gazette*, June 3, 1987.; Darryl Woodson, “Consolidation Talks to Continue,” *The News Gazette*, September 14, 1988.; Darryl Woodson, “County Board Asks School Bond Vote,” *The News Gazette*, December 21, 1988.

⁴⁰ “Peabody Report Due Tuesday,” *The News Gazette*, October 11, 1967.

⁴¹ Darryl Woodson, “Consolidation Revisited: What Went Wrong,” *The News Gazette*, March 4, 1987.; “Yes: School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted,” *The News Gazette*, April 5, 1989.

⁴² Darryl Woodson, “County OK’s New H.S. Agreement,” *The News Gazette*, May 3, 1989.

and discussions with the city of Lexington on merging schools, and even potentially merging the two governments pushed against consolidation plans that addressed only county geography.⁴³

The two primary consolidation plans were to either merge all three high schools to one central location, or to remove students from one jointly owned high school with the city and place them in the other two high schools renovated to accommodate the expansion.⁴⁴ Because the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors pressured the city of Lexington to participate in consolidation, via considering city annexation, “Dual Consolidation”, as the renovation plan was called, fell to the wayside.

The stakes of consolidation were high. The estimated cost of a new high school for both city and county students was \$13.2 million, \$2.7 million dollars more expensive than “Dual Consolidation”.⁴⁵ If the county pursued “Dual Consolidation”, then city students would not be included, leaving an aging school building made for over 1,000 students occupied by roughly 206, and fully financed by the city instead of both the city and the county.⁴⁶ The city wanted to avoid unnecessary costs, and advocated for consolidating into a new single building. If that was not possible, the city considered reverting to town status to force the county to place their students.⁴⁷ However, building a new central high school would remove key educational institutions from the communities of Natural Bridge and Fairfield. Residents of these

⁴³ Darryl Woodson, “County Pushes For Full Consolidation,” *The News Gazette*, August 31, 1988.; “Consolidation Talks to Continue,” *The News Gazette*, September 14, 1988.; Deborah Sensabaugh, “City Unveils Consolidation Proposal,” *The News Gazette*, August 10, 1988.; “It Must Be Fair to All,” *The News Gazette*, November 9, 1988.; Darryl Woodson, “Consolidation Process Breaks Down,”

⁴⁴ Darryl Woodson, “School Consolidation Report Revealed,” *The News Gazette*, May 11, 1988.

⁴⁵ Darryl Woodson, “Cost Comparative Analysis: Dual and Single Consolidation,” *The News Gazette*, May 11, 1988.

⁴⁶ “City Details School Options,” *The News Gazette*, March 25, 1987.

⁴⁷ “Consolidation Talks to Continue,” *The News Gazette*, September 14, 1988.; Deborah Sensabaugh, “City Unveils Consolidation Proposal,” *The News Gazette*, August 10, 1988.

communities were greatly attached to these schools, forming the interest group “Taxpayers Against Consolidation” to preserve their local educational institutions.⁴⁸

When the deliberation over consolidation ended, the Board of Supervisors did have the power to veto the school board’s recommendations. However, they decided to defer to a county referendum. This was done for a few reasons. Consolidation had been a lasting issue for 22 years by the time of the referendum in 1989. Rockbridge County’s residents were well informed and invested in the issue. This made a referendum a politically safe option for supervisors. By giving citizens the final say, they could not be held responsible for such an impactful decision in the following election. They would simply be executing the public’s wishes. This coupled with the replacement of several supervisors and school board members after consolidation was initially approved in the 1970s was another effective reminder to defer to local stakeholders’ wishes.⁴⁹ Finally, the decision to originally consolidate in 1974 was determined by referendum as well. County residents approved the bonds to fund consolidation with 1,925 votes in favor and 1,452 against.⁵⁰ One alleged reason why the former members lost their seats in the aftermath was because they supported pressing forward despite inflation to the costs of the consolidation project.⁵¹ Thus not only was a referendum an acceptable means of decision making, but it also was not the reason for the electorate responding strongly against the local government. It was the obstinance of local government after the financial landscape changed after consolidation was initially approved. These reasons made cautious and tempered handling of funding any consolidation proposal necessary.

⁴⁸ Darryl Woodson. “Group Organizes to Oppose Consolidation,” *The News Gazette*, February 11, 1987.

⁴⁹ “Consolidation Revisited: What Went Wrong,” *The News Gazette*, March 4, 1987.

⁵⁰ Darryl Woodson, “Consolidation: What Went Wrong,” *The News Gazette*, March 4, 1987.; See Appendix E

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Kingdon's assessment of the executive branch was that the president influenced the policy process by setting the agenda.⁵² It seems for consolidation, Rockbridge County's Board of Supervisors have limited agenda setting influence, but greater authority influencing and generating policy alternatives. This is a key distinction. The board of supervisors, because it has financial powers the federal executive branch does not, had a tool to propose and eliminate policy alternatives. However, because the board of supervisors operated more as the financial wing of local government, it did not have the same agenda setting authority at the local level that the President in the federal government did.

Rockbridge County School Board

The Rockbridge County school board functions as a local government legislative branch because they are one of the many local departments that propose and deliberate over policy. After deliberation and approval of their own proposed policy, the board of supervisors then holds the final decision with financial authority. Thus, if the school board has the same powers in the policy process as their congressional counterparts, they have minimal authority to set the agenda, but have ample room to propose policy alternatives.⁵³

However, the Rockbridge County school board has the capability to set the agenda. What led to the renewed proposal for consolidation was a school board discussion over the joint ownership of Lexington High School between Rockbridge County and the City of Lexington. The agreement between the localities called for the school boards to maintain and continue the

⁵² Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 23-24, 27.

⁵³ Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 34-36.

agreement as necessary.⁵⁴ The looming end to the joint ownership contract in 1989, led to discussions in 1986 about how to minimize costs while still providing educational equity across Rockbridge County's school system.⁵⁵ While the Rockbridge County board of supervisors had little ability to spark consolidation discussions without the contribution of other localities, the school board proposed consolidation on its own and with ease.

Afterwards, the school board bore the responsibility of informing the electorate, holding hearings and gathering information from residents, further cementing their ability to set the policy agenda.⁵⁶ While the school board still needed to consider local stakeholders' wishes, it was able to go from formulating the policy to presenting it to Rockbridge County's citizens with no infringement. The topic and tone of discussion originated and disseminated from one source.

While the school board had agenda setting power, it only had a moderate influence in proposing alternatives. Because the board of supervisors have financial sway, their alternatives required serious consideration by the school board. Also, since school board positions are elected offices, the electorate's wishes need consideration. The school board proposed "dual consolidation" to alleviate the concerns of residents who feared losing their local high school.⁵⁷ However, building a new consolidated high school was preferred because of the board of supervisors' wishes to include Lexington's student population.⁵⁸ While the school board also has the ability to propose alternatives to policy propositions, there is little incentive unless the potential for successful policy or reelection is threatened.

⁵⁴ Darryl Woodson, "Citizens Group Calls for Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, October 2, 1985.; Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Proposals to be Studied," *The News Gazette*, January 7, 1987.; Darryl Woodson, "LHS Contract to be Terminated," *The News Gazette*, June 24, 1987.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Darryl Woodson, "Residents Question Jay on Consolidation Options," *The News Gazette*, January 14, 1987.

⁵⁷ Darryl Woodson, "School Consolidation Report Revealed," *The News Gazette*, May 11, 1988.

⁵⁸ Darryl Woodson, "County Pushes For Full Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, August 31, 1988.

Failure to listen was not an option. The failed consolidation in the 1970s led to the removal of some school board members from office as costs for consolidation increased dramatically before construction began.⁵⁹ The electorate desired slow, deliberate, cost effective change. The board of supervisors on the other hand can merely kill a motion. The school board attempted to rush through a consolidation measure, placing county students in Lexington High School by 1988.⁶⁰ Their reasoning was to prevent a county measure to defund the joint ownership of Lexington High School prematurely.⁶¹ The county did vote against the rushed consolidation measure and decided to not move forward with defunding the joint ownership of Lexington High School.⁶² Although the Rockbridge County school board can easily set the educational agenda, it must consider the wishes of the board of supervisors and the electorate in making alternative plans.

The News Gazette

Kingdon's view of media's relation to the policy process was that it had minimal effect on the agenda because it merely reports government actions to policy process outsiders towards the end of the policy process.⁶³ This held mostly true during Rockbridge County's consolidation. The primary means of *The News Gazette's* influence rested in providing platforms for citizens to give their voice, editorials commenting on the policy process, and reporting school board and board of supervisor actions. However, the exception lies where outsiders can influence the policy process—such as a referendum. What's unique about *The News Gazette's* position is that it was

⁵⁹ "Consolidation Revisited: What Went Wrong," *The News Gazette*, March 4, 1987.

⁶⁰ Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Takes New Twist," *The News Gazette*, May 27, 1987.

⁶¹ "School Drama Began With Board Action Wednesday," *The News Gazette*, June 3, 1987.

⁶² "Supervisors Threaten to Block School Board Move," *The News Gazette*, June 3, 1987.

⁶³ Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 58-59, 61.

the sole provider for local news and events during the consolidation timeframe. Thus, the electorate's access to information could only come from the school board, board of supervisors, or *The News Gazette*, giving ample power to the press in affecting policy.

The News Gazette gave ample space for citizens to express their opinion on consolidation. Between 1986 and April 1989, it published 50 letters to the editor on the matter.⁶⁴ Parents, school employees, and concerned outsiders expressed support and opposition to consolidation.⁶⁵ While this had little influence in the policy process up to the referendum, it gave ample public deliberation prior to a county-wide vote in April 1989. *The News Gazette* also had a large readership base. Between 1986 and 1989, *The News Gazette* increased from 3439 to 4193 subscribers, and had an increase in total papers sold, outside of subscriptions, from 8859 to 9617.⁶⁶ Additionally, the paper issued several editorials giving context to how consolidation, and potential city annexation, could affect both county and city residents, before endorsing consolidation prior to the referendum.⁶⁷ Because of *The News Gazette*, outsiders were well informed and provided input on the consolidation process, before issuing their final say in the referendum.

Traditional reporting was another means of informing outsiders. One of the ways *The News Gazette* informed citizens about the potential effects of consolidation was through covering local hearings on consolidation. The Rockbridge County school board planned to have six public

⁶⁴ *The News Gazette*, 1986-1989.

⁶⁵ William K. Todd Jr., "Comments on Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, February 25, 1987.; Greer C. Stene, "Urges Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, March 4, 1987.; Nanalou W. Sauder, "High School Consolidation at Vo-tech Site Urged," *The News Gazette*, July 5, 1987.; Earl S. Studwell, "Suggests Eliminating New School," *The News Gazette*, August 10, 1988.

⁶⁶ Matt Paxton, publisher of *The News Gazette*, email message to the Author, March 23, 2018.

⁶⁷ "An Option Worth Looking At," *The News Gazette*, March 11, 1987.; "A Time of Opportunity," *The News Gazette*, April 1, 1987.; "It Must Be Fair to All," *The News Gazette*, November 9, 1988.; "Concerted Action Needed," *The News Gazette* November 23, 1988.

hearings, but only held three because of inclement weather.⁶⁸ Coverage of the two hearings was extensive, highlighting the frustration with the proposal in Natural Bridge, Va. and mixed views among residents near Central Elementary school.⁶⁹ While coverage of events was relayed after they occurred, the reports still gave citizens information for the upcoming referendum.

What gave *The News Gazette* greater influence informing county residents was their reach and access to citizens. Because of a heavy snowfall, the school board could not reach many interested citizens—cancelling their hearings instead. However, access to *The News Gazette* was no issue. The number of subscribers ensured local citizens were hearing about how the consolidation process was unfolding.

With thousands of regular readers, *The News Gazette* had the attention of a greater proportion of the electorate than the school board or board of supervisors could attain. As the primary means for informing citizens, *The News Gazette* was in the position to influence consolidation's outcome. It used its platform to give residents a voice, to report on progress, and even insert the editors' opinions in order to inform and ensure a democratic outcome. While Kingdon's analysis that media influences outside the process is correct, it fails to consider matters of referendum where outsiders hold the same power as insiders.

Interest Groups

Kingdon's assessment of interest groups was that they were more important in non-partisan, low recognition campaigns. That influence, when well-coordinated, has the potential to

⁶⁸ Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Input Mixed at Hearings," *The News Gazette*, January 21, 1987.; "Public Hearings on Consolidation Cancelled," *The News Gazette*, January 28, 1987.; Darryl Woodson, "County Residents Voiced Opinions On Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, July 13, 1988.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

set the agenda for an issue.⁷⁰ Rockbridge County's school consolidation had interest groups on both sides vying for influence, hoping to bring a favorable policy. The city of Lexington was in favor of consolidation as that would result in a new shared high school building, keeping its own costs low. In contrast a citizens group called "Taxpayers Against Consolidation" formed at the beginning of deliberation with the hopes of preventing a new single school building from taking students away from their local communities.

The Lexington city school board and the city council held hearings to gather citizen input about whether to join in consolidation.⁷¹ This stood in lieu of a referendum on consolidation. They also held multiple meetings with Rockbridge County's government, proposing to help fund a new consolidated high school in exchange for allowing Lexington's students to attend.⁷² This negotiation had varying offers, ranging from Lexington paying for 20% of the school's construction and operating costs, to declaring town status, which would place the education question completely in county hands.⁷³ While the board of supervisors did attempt to annex Lexington's education system, they did not show any desire to annex the city as a whole. Because of Lexington's vested interest, the city was able to prevent the dual consolidation proposal—which would have left Lexington without a local high school—from becoming policy.⁷⁴ Lexington's position allowed them to both set the agenda and propose alternatives.

⁷⁰ Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 47, 52-53.

⁷¹ Donna Frazier, "City Schools Give Options: Citizens Views Lean Towards Cooperation," *The News Gazette*, March 4, 1987.

⁷² Darryl Woodson, "City School Options Are Questioned," *The News Gazette*, April 1, 1987.; "City Unveils Consolidation Proposal," *The News Gazette*, August 10, 1988.; Darryl Woodson, "County Board Asks School Bond Vote," *The News Gazette*, December 21, 1988.; Darryl Woodson, "City Signs High School Agreement," *The News Gazette*, May 10, 1989.

⁷³ "City Unveils Consolidation Proposal," *The News Gazette*, August 10, 1988.; "City Signs High School Agreement," *The News Gazette*, May 10, 1989.

⁷⁴ "Consolidation Talks to Continue," *The News Gazette*, September 14, 1988.

The Taxpayers Against Consolidation formed shortly after consolidation was proposed in 1986. They bluntly opposed consolidation on the premise that it would unduly raise taxes for county citizens while taking high schools away from Natural Bridge and Fairfield, Va.⁷⁵ This movement gained significant traction, drawing the attendance of over 100 citizens at a meeting and some members of the Board of Supervisors.⁷⁶ However, the group did not receive coverage after 1987, showing the movement lost steam as coverage and deliberation over consolidation continued. The dual consolidation proposition allowed for increased funding to the current high schools while allowing local communities to keep their school buildings. This was a compromise that could appease opponents, but it was passed over to incorporate Lexington into the merger.

Interest groups in both the local and federal level have varying levels of influence. In local elections, because the electorate is so small, its members become mixed with the interest groups. Interest groups' ability to set the agenda and propose alternatives are present in a similar manner to Kingdon's analysis. The power to do these, however, depends on the issue. In the case of education in Rockbridge, the issue was highly polarized, with a 30-vote split determining consolidation's fate.⁷⁷ Unlike Kingdon's analysis of federal interest groups, Lexington's city council and school board showed how even in a highly polarized situation, interest groups can have power at the local level. What matters is who is represented by the interest group and the aims of the policy creators.

The Electorate

⁷⁵ "Group Organizes to Oppose Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, February 11, 1987.; Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Draws Local Opposition," *The News Gazette*, February 18, 1987.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Darryl Woodson, "Yes: School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted," *The News Gazette* April 5, 1989.; See Appendix D

At the federal level, Kingdon addresses local stakeholders' influence on the policy process as public opinion. He finds that public opinion can empower political action, but for the most part hinders it—giving local stakeholders an agenda setting power as a whole.⁷⁸ For the question of Rockbridge County's school consolidation, local stakeholders had significantly more policy power, but had little influence in setting the initial agenda. Not only did citizens have a large voice in *The News Gazette*, the only local newspaper, but they also participated in a referendum as the final decision on consolidation.

Consolidation was proposed by the school board and deliberated among county and city officials. Citizens were mostly on the sidelines, only able to give their input at the few hearings held for them. Local stakeholders' primary source of consolidation news was *The News Gazette* as this was the most accessible report of local government action. Thus, the citizens of Rockbridge county could only sit and watch as local government officials figured out the details. However, local stakeholders' wishes had to be carefully considered because a referendum approving construction of a consolidated school was the final hurdle for policy implementation.

During the first attempt to consolidate in the 1970s, Rockbridge County held a referendum because citizens complained the county gave minimal input to its residents.⁷⁹ The second referendum in 1989 was based in that precedent.⁸⁰ For the county, not holding a referendum would bring severe backlash from constituents. The weeks following the referendum showed significant civic engagement, with numerous pieces written for *The News Gazette* calling for support and opposition to consolidation through the referendum.⁸¹ The final vote was

⁷⁸ Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 65-66.

⁷⁹ "Consolidation Revisited: What Went Wrong," *The News Gazette*, March 4, 1987.

⁸⁰ Darryl Woodson, "County Board Asks School Bond Vote," *The News Gazette*, December 21, 1988.

⁸¹ DeWitt, Fix, "Supports Consolidated High School," *The News Gazette*, March 8, 1989.; Shannon C. Maini, "Student Favors H.S. Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, March 8, 1989.; Clinton L. Anderson, "Writer Says Vote Yes on Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, March 15, 1989.; Barbara K. Dunlap, "Says Referendum Date Premature," *The News Gazette*, March 22, 1989.; Wallace Beckner, "Says Yes Vote Means Better Schools," *The*

extremely close with 1398 citizens supporting consolidation and 1368 in opposition.⁸² By a slim margin, the citizens of Rockbridge county approved the consolidation policy. This referendum was the bottle-neck in the policy stream. No consolidation could occur without a successful referendum.

The influence of local stakeholders upon consolidation was less set in agenda setting or alternative framing, but rather as the final stamp of approval. In this case, public opinion was not merely a suggestion, but instead the litmus test for policy. While not all local government decisions hinge on a referendum, those that do give local stakeholders authority in the policy process that outweighs every other institution. This is the most significant difference from the federal policy process, as it completely changes the focus in policy. Instead of focusing on interest group coalitions, reelection, or personal ambition local lawmakers have to focus on what local stakeholders will approve.

Analysis

At the local level, political outsiders have a greater influence on the policy process. When there is a referendum involved, local stakeholders have a significantly greater say in setting the policy agenda in terms of implementation. They also have influence upon interest groups as small, local issues result in interest groups working for grass roots support. The Taxpayers Against Consolidation is an excellent example, because it was entirely local. Its members were all county residents and its goals focused on Rockbridge County education. The media,

News Gazette, March 22, 1989.; Allen G. Strecker, "Calls for Supporting School Plan," *The News Gazette*, March 29, 1989.; Harold L. Dodson, "Says referendum Should be Delayed," *The News Gazette*, March 29, 1989.; Thomas J. McCabe III, "Says Time is Right for School Plan," *The News Gazette*, March 29, 1989.; The Rev. A. G. Hamann, "Outlines Reasons for Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, March 29, 1989.; C.E. McDaniel, "Writer Against Consolidation Plan," *The News Gazette*, March 29, 1989.; John Patton, "Consolidation Not The Answer," *The News Gazette*, March 29, 1989.

⁸² Darryl Woodson, "Yes: School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted," *The News Gazette* April 5, 1989.

particularly in a small rural setting, is centralized to a few sources, giving *The News Gazette* credibility presenting information and news. Local stakeholders did not really have a choice but to trust *The News Gazette* for information. This results in significant media influence in consolidation's outcome. *The News Gazette* issued editorials in favor of consolidation to a new building, preserving Lexington's own education system, and ensuring Lexington kept its city status. All of these policy goals were realized by the time Rockbridge County High School was built in 1992.

In contrast, the impact of the Rockbridge County board of supervisors and school board upon the policy process was severely curtailed. While the School Board did have the authority to propose consolidation, its funding was completely at the whim of the board of supervisors. Even if the board of supervisors agreed, they relinquished their decision-making ability to local stakeholders.

Their roles are also different from Kingdon's analysis of the executive and legislative branches at the federal level. The board of supervisors holds the power of the purse and considers policy proposals from the school board. However, if the board of supervisors wanted a specific consolidation policy, they could not require the school board to consider it. They do not hold the same political clout as the presidency. The board of supervisors' control of finances in the county does give them power to propose alternatives to weigh against a board's policy proposal, but that is not the same as setting the agenda. County boards, such as the school board however have the ability to propose policy. It was the Rockbridge County school board that first considered consolidating schools. Their ability to propose alternatives is shaped from outside pressure in either appeasing interest groups or the board of supervisors' wishes. While this

means the school board, and other county boards can propose alternatives, because they are small governing bodies, they have little incentive to without outside pressure.

Figure 1: The Influence of Actors in the Policy Process—Kingdon and Small Local Government

Policy Actor:	Kingdon's Framework	Small Local Government
Insiders		
Executive Branch:	<i>(Presidency) Holds the primary agenda setting authority. Is limited in proposing alternatives.</i>	<i>(board of supervisors) Proposes alternatives. Can refuse to fund policy proposals it disagrees with—frames alternatives.</i>
Legislative Branch:	<i>(Congress) Competition between members makes agenda setting difficult. But it is a deliberative body that considers policy alternatives.</i>	<i>(smaller boards, e.g. school board) Source of policy proposals in government. Considers alternatives when necessary</i>
Outsiders		
Media:	<i>Often reports on issues after a policy is decided upon or being implemented. Minimal effect on agenda setting or proposing alternatives.</i>	<i>The primary source of updates in policies under deliberation. Effectively proposes alternatives while encouraging popular involvement.</i>
Interest Groups:	<i>Conditionally important in non-partisan, low participation issues. Can set the agenda for their policy of interest if influence is tactfully used.</i>	<i>Made by local stakeholders or locally interested institutions. Propose alternatives to policy being proposed because these groups take a reactionary role, in response to a potential policy.</i>
Local stakeholders:	<i>Primarily gives input as public opinion, contributing to the deliberation of policy and considering alternatives.</i>	<i>Also gives public opinion, but in cases where there is a referendum local stakeholders have the power to definitively stop all unpopular potential policies.</i>

In essence Kingdon's observations that federal policy influence shows a strong government with weaker outside forces is flipped at the local level. Additionally, the roles of government branches in the policy process switch. Figure 1 gives a summary of these changes. Because of them, local government is more directly influenced by local stakeholders than the federal government.

Conclusion

Kingdon's framework at the federal level does not perfectly mesh with local government structures. The legislative and executive influences are flipped and outsiders have greater influence on the local policy process. This results in local stakeholders holding the bulk of the power in a policy decision compared to control resting primarily in congress and the White House.

Understanding local government policy can expand upon Kingdon's model providing nuance to his perspective. Further research on different types of local government policies would help give context on the role of outsiders when there is no referendum in the process. Additionally, local government in Rockbridge County may function differently than more urban areas, or even than localities in other states. Research focused on urban local governments can provide context to how the local government policy process works in general. Finally, education was not one of the fields that Kingdon analyzed. While this field is subject to the same policy process and government framework as healthcare and transportation, there may be differences in how interest groups act in the education field than what Kingdon observes regarding healthcare.

The Rural Town's Struggle:

How the Consolidation of Rockbridge County's High Schools Harmed Community Viability

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Research and Thesis I

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Introduction

The consolidation of high schools in Rockbridge County, Virginia brought significant changes to the lives of its inhabitants. In consolidating its three high schools, the towns of Fairfield and Natural Bridge Station lost their primary educational institutions and social centers. Shifts of such magnitude can have rippling effects in the community, including the migration of residents and the potential for a decline in political and community participation. A school consolidation can test the cohesiveness and viability of a small community.

Rockbridge County's consolidation was similar to other school consolidations that occurred when educators thought it beneficial. From 1920 to 1970, the number of school districts declined tenfold in a span of 50 years.⁸³ Most consolidations affected rural communities whose residents were in uproar over losing their schools, and Rockbridge County was no different. However, its school consolidation was very late compared to most—incomplete until 1992—and gave its citizens the luxury of voting to determine community support for the merger. The very slim majority that voted for consolidation underscored the contentious nature of the issue. In its aftermath, the consolidation of Rockbridge County's high schools corresponded with a decline of community viability indicators, including voter turnout for state level elections, diversity of businesses, and the number of community events held within the county in both Fairfield and Natural Bridge Station. Other indicators, such as the education level of residents, average income, and total population did not decline, but indicate a separation between the affected

⁸³ Christopher Berry, "School Consolidation and Inequality," *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* no. 9. (2006): 49. accessed September 15, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20067277>.; Thomas A. Lyson, "What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York." (Report to the National Science Foundation, Cornell University, April 2002): 1, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED464777.pdf>.

towns and the rest of the county.⁸⁴ These correlations provide insight about how the closure of educational institutions in small rural communities affects other aspects of civil life.

Review of Literature

Looking at the themes in consolidation cases, specifically community life is essential. Without making these connections, it is challenging to see beyond consolidation's impact on schools and students. Viability is related to a strong democratic community that encourages active social and political engagement from its citizens. Alexis DeTocqueville's *Democracy in America* credits the strength of American democracy partly to the strong social associations that link citizens together.⁸⁵ Because, schools serve as a linkage institution, they have a social role as well as an educational one. Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone: The Decline of American Social Capital" discusses a perceived decline in American social institutions and suggests that threatened American democratic principles.⁸⁶ If Putnam's original claim is correct, then the trend towards school consolidation is harmful to our quality of government. All of this considered, the

⁸⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Unit Counts, PHC-3-48, October 2003: 2, 6, 17, 20. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/phc-3-48.pdf>.; U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, General Population Characteristics: Virginia 1980, PC80-1-B48, August 1982, 224, https://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980/1980censusofpopu80148uns_bw.pdf; Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau; Census of Population and Housing, 1980: Summary Tape File 3a. ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2002.; Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau; Census of Population and Housing, 1990: Summary Tape File 3a. ICPSR version. prepared by the Bureau of the Census. Washington D.C., 1991.; Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau; 2000 Census of Population and Housing, Summary File 3: Technical Documentation, 2001.; Bureau, County Intercensal Datasets: 2000-2010, Intercensal Estimates of the Resident Population by Five-Year Age Groups and Sex for Counties: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2010, December 2, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/intercensal-2000-2010-counties.html>.; Rockbridge County Virginia Department of Transportation. County Record. 1980-2000.; Samuel Crickenberger, Rockbridge County Director of Community Development, email message to the Author, March 13, 2018.

⁸⁵ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer, (New York, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1969): 509-513.

⁸⁶ Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January, 1995): 65-78. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/16643>.; Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

literature examined here focuses strictly on consolidation trends, history, and observational impact, along with the factors that maintain and develop community life.

Consolidation and Its Impact

Scholars acknowledge that consolidating schools affects the students and the broader community. The discussion in this regard addresses its benefits and detriments. Those in favor of school consolidation often refer to its cost effectiveness and improvements on student performance, while those against it believe that the communities that lose their local schools face undue hardship. Favorable studies attest to consolidation's cost-effectiveness through the reduction of teachers, buildings, and bus fuel consumption.⁸⁷ In terms of quality, there are a few reports claiming school consolidation improved student performance and school life. However, these studies all differed in their measures and standards for educational quality, including graduation rates, state test scores, educational program diversity, and survey responses from students and teachers.⁸⁸ The lack of a standard definition for educational quality makes it difficult to determine how these measurements exhibit a "quality education". The argument for consolidation focuses on maximizing the reach of taxpayer dollars and bolstering activities and learning opportunities for students by having a greater population than non-consolidated schools.

⁸⁷ Ted Schwinden and Lynda Brannon, "School Reorganization in Montana: Time for a Decision?," report to the Montana School Boards Association, April 30, 1993, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444769.pdf>: 20, 45-48.; "School District Reorganization and School Consolidation Report," report to the Mississippi State Board of Education by the State Educational Finance Commission, Jackson, Mississippi, 1985.; Timothy Zimmer, Larry DeBoer, and Marilyn Hirth. "Examining Economies of Scale in School Consolidation." *Journal of Education Finance* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 111. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40704380>.

⁸⁸ Brian C. Myatt, "Small-Scale School Consolidation: Implications in the Oneida City School District 1988-1995," Master's Thesis, State University of New York, 2000: 30.; Tucker L. Self, "Evaluation of a Single School District Consolidation in Ohio," *American Secondary Education* 30, no. 1 (Fall 2001), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41057829>: 76.

James Conant's *The American High School Today* is considered the seminal work in promoting consolidation, where he emphasized the importance of a comprehensive education. He thought schools needed a diversity of student programs to focus on democratic principles, offer numerous electives, and provide challenging courses for students who were college bound. In order for a school to successfully provide all of these things, he determined a graduating class of 100 students or more was mandatory.⁸⁹ Conant's book was well received by educational leaders, and they sought to implement his suggestions. Robert Hampel, reviewing Conant's work, believed his urgency and later public support were partly due to Cold War developments at the time. Hampel primarily referred to the launch of Sputnik's impact on the space race between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.⁹⁰ This Cold War-inspired call for educational reform swept through the nation and accelerated the trend of consolidating small rural school districts.

The studies that claim consolidation has unintended consequences that increase costs and hinder educational quality and attainment are just as numerous as the studies that show consolidation's benefits. Detractors note a heavier reliance on bussing students, lack of improvement in ACT scores, and some examples of budgetary issues after consolidation.⁹¹ Some anti-consolidation observers say consolidation's impact on community autonomy outweighed the pro-consolidation claims. They cite the democratic qualities exhibited in small rural schools, such as community involvement, and how the consolidation movement has undermined the

⁸⁹ James Conant, *The American High School Today*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015004075357;view=1up;seq=2>. 14-16.

⁹⁰ Robert L. Hampel, "The American High School Today: James Bryant Conant's Reservations and Reconsiderations." *The Phi Delta Kappan* 64, no. 9 (May 1983): 608-610. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20386830>.

⁹¹ Sher, Jonathan P. and Rachel B. Tompkins. Economy, Efficiency, and Equality: The Myths of Rural School and District Consolidation. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare: National Institute of Education, 1976: 4, 7, 10, 16, 28.; Betty Cox and Becky Cox, "A Decade of Results: A Case for School District Consolidation?," *Education* 131, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 87-88, 91.

ability of local areas to have a say in the children's education.⁹² The crux of the consolidation issue in the mind of anti-consolidation scholars is whether or not having a community centered education system outweighs the desires to cut costs for the sake of efficiency. An essential element to this dilemma is how the loss of a school changes the surrounding community.

Education researchers recognize that schools are an inseparable part of a local community. They note how the local community comprises the environment students learn in and posit that a healthy relationship between the school and the community ensures effective democratic governance.⁹³ Additionally, they recognize that the role of schools is not merely educational, but also social, providing young community members the opportunity to make connections that can ensure long term community viability.⁹⁴ When a school is removed from a community, the entire community is affected. Multiple studies show schools are signs of community vitality, and that the loss of a school to consolidation has negative effects including

⁹² Aaron J. Saiger, "The School District Boundary Problem," *The Urban Lawyer* 42, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 512. accessed September 16, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27895808>.; Robert A. Garda Jr. and David S. Doty, "The Legal Impact of Emerging Governance Models on Public Education and its Office Holders," *The Urban Lawyer* 45, no.1 (Winter 2013): 50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24392339>.; Thomas J. Mauhs-Pugh. "12,000 Little Republics: Civic Apprenticeship and the Cult of Efficiency." *New York History* 86, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 253. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23185794>.; Christopher Berry and Martin R. West, "Growing Pains: The School Consolidation Movement and Student Outcomes," *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 26, no.1 (April 2010): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25620048>.; Berry, "School Consolidation and Inequality," 54.; Campbell F. Scribner, *The Fight for Local Control: Schools, Suburbs, and American Democracy*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2016) 36-38, 179.; Campbell F. Scribner, "'Culture Wars' in the Countryside: The Fight for Rural Schools." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 95, no.2 (Winter 2011/2012): 20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41549199>.

⁹³ Kelly Donnell, "Beyond the Deficit Paradigm: An Ecological Orientation to Thriving Urban Schools," in *Educational Foundations: An Anthology of Critical Readings*, ed. Alan S. Canestrani and Bruce A. Marlowe (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), 151-157.; Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and The Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 289.

⁹⁴ Hammer, Patricia Cahape. "Rural Education and Rural Community Viability." (master's thesis: Marshall University, May 5, 1995), 136-137. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED411108.pdf>.; Veronica DeRaadt, "Multi-modal Systems Method: The Impact of Normative Factors on Community Viability," *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 18, no. 2 (March/April 2001): 178. .; Bruce A. Miller, "Rural Distress and Survival: The School and the Importance of 'Community'," *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 93. http://jrre.vmlhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/9-2_9.pdf.; Bruce Miller, "The Role of Rural Schools in Community Development: Policy Issues and Implications. Program Report." (report to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement: Washington D.C., July 31, 1995), 3. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED393617.pdf>.; Lyson, Thomas A. "What Does a School Mean to a Community?," 2.

increased income inequality, decline in civic engagement, and population movement away from rural areas.⁹⁵ Scholars claim schools are indeed the pillars of communities, since it is evident that the loss of a school due to consolidation has an enormous impact. Whether or not schools can sustain a community themselves, and what aspects of community viability schools affect are different matters altogether.

What Sustains the Community

Educational policy scholars have attempted to catalogue the relationship between a school's closure and its community's viability, most often in the form of case studies that examine how the presence of a local school meets the needs of a local community.⁹⁶ The most detailed definition of a viable community came from Pinkerton and Brown's "Rural Community Viability and Leadership Patterns", determining it is a locality that, "preserves a degree of local control and responds to the needs of community members while relating effectively to institutions of the larger society."⁹⁷ Thus, the goal of studying what makes a community viable is

⁹⁵ Tom Lyson, "The Importance of Schools to Rural Community Viability," in *A Mathematics Educator's Introduction to Rural Policy Issues*, ed. Michael S. Waters (Report to the Appalachian Collaborative Center for Learning, Assessment, and Instruction in Mathematics, Ohio University, August 2005). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED491046.pdf>; Joe Bard, Clark Gardner, and Regi Wieland, "Rural School Consolidation: History, Research Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations," *The Rural Educator* 27, no.2 (2006): 40-48. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ783851.pdf>; Lyson, "What Does a School Mean to a Community?"; Michael Irwin, Charles Tolbert and Thomas Lyson, "How to build strong home towns," *American Demographics*, 19, no.2 (1997):42-47.; Alan Peshkin, *The Imperfect Union: School Consolidation and Community Conflict*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 156, 157, 163, 164.

⁹⁶ Hadden, "When the School is the Community: A Case Study of Fourche Valley School, Briggsville, Arkansas,."; Michael N. Johnson, "School Leaders and the Renewal of Rural Community: Dare the Schools Save an Old Social Order?," (presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration: Indian Wells, CA, August 1994), 11, 19. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED375997.pdf>; Lyson, "What Does a School Mean to a Community?", 4-5.

⁹⁷ James R. Pinkerton and Ralph B. Brown. "Rural Community Viability and Leadership Patterns." (presentation at The Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association: Washington D.C., August 11-15, 1990), 4. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED334050.pdf>.

measuring specific indicators that show local control, connection to the broader region, and that the needs of community members are being met.

The approach in identifying and measuring these indicators has differed between analyses. Most studies focus on economic indicators such as income levels, employment, the variety of businesses in a community, and human resource availability including school enrollment and population changes.⁹⁸ Hammer's "Rural Education and Rural Community Viability" took those indicators and expanded upon them, analyzing changes in social, intellectual, and environmental capital. Hammer claims the presence of social organizations, especially schools, high levels of education among residents, and environmental quality are all indicators of whether a community was thriving or merely surviving.⁹⁹ All of these measurements show a community's viability and can highlight the problems a community faces. A community losing its businesses, facing higher unemployment rates, and decreasing population signifies decline, providing less for those still residing there than a community that succeeds in all of these indicators.

A community can also face problems that threaten their viability which are not measured by economic performance, social associations, and community activity. When a community loses the ability to decide local issues for themselves and youth socialization primarily occurs outside of the community in distant schools or urban areas, then that community is more likely to face decline.¹⁰⁰ The rise of school consolidation in the United States is a prominent example. Often without the consent of individuals within the community, the removal of local schools decreased

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 5-6.; Young Chen, Lena Etuk, and Bruce Weber. "Are Small Communities at Risk of Population Loss." *Annals of Regional Science* 51, no. 2 (October 2013): 350.; Bruce A. Miller, "Rural Distress and Survival," 87-89; Bruce Miller. "The Role of Rural Schools in Community Development", 2-3.

⁹⁹ Hammer, "Rural Education and Rural Community Viability," 18.

¹⁰⁰ DeRaadt, "Multi-modal Systems Method: The Impact of Normative Factors on Community Viability," 178-179.; Miller, "Rural Distress and Survival: The School and the Importance of 'Community'", 92.

the number of areas where youth could socialize near their homes. With youth socializing outside the community, opportunities for them to develop community ties and attachment decrease. This could contribute to further decline in indicators of community viability.

Although schools are an essential component to maintaining community viability, scholars are hesitant to call local schools the sole savior for communities in decline. Hadden's case study of the Foursche Valley School in Arkansas commends the school's efforts in aiding the community it serves, but because of continuing economic decline, Hadden states that unless the Briggsville community makes other productive decisions, the school will not be enough to sustain the community.¹⁰¹ Johnson's presentation on community renewal through local school leaders attributes community decline to the actions of elites, and cautions that merely the presence of local schools is insufficient to counter this, especially if educators package an education as the way out of a declining community.¹⁰² For a school to preserve a community's viability, the community also has to be invested in maintaining itself. Pinkerton and Brown emphasized this, claiming intra-communal work is needed, especially in an age where communication with others outside the community is continually getting easier.¹⁰³

While schools are not the sole insurers of a community's viability, they constitute essential support for the struggling rural community. Rural areas that lose their schools are increasingly likely to face deterioration and abandonment. Considering this, most literature views school consolidation destructive to local areas that lose community centers which serve as educational and social institutions. The approach of Hadden, Hammer, DeRaadt, and others will

¹⁰¹ Hadden, "When the School is the Community: A Case Study of Fourche Valley School, Briggsville, Arkansas." 136.

¹⁰² Johnson, "School Leaders and the Renewal of Rural Community: Dare the Schools Save an Old Social Order?," 10, 19.

¹⁰³ Pinkerton and Brown, "Rural Community Viability and Leadership Patterns," 16.

help analyze the impact of consolidation in Rockbridge County, where the towns of Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield lost vital support for their communities.

Methodology

This study evaluates how the 1992 consolidation of high schools in Rockbridge County, VA, affected its communities. School consolidation is examined through the experiences of the communities of the towns of Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield and focuses on how measures of community viability changes as a result of school consolidation. Rockbridge County was selected as a case because of its similarities to the general trends identified in the literature review. It is a rural community on the eastern edge of the Appalachian region towards the southern end of the Shenandoah Valley, with a rural landscape, history, and culture similar to most communities that faced consolidation during its peak between the 1920s and the 1970s.¹⁰⁴

Rockbridge citizens had the luxury of having a voice in the consolidation decision via a contentious referendum over funding the proposed building that would replace the high schools. While this method was uncommon, it was not unique as there were other mergers that were not state mandated or gave local communities control over consolidation.¹⁰⁵ What makes Rockbridge's case markedly different is the longevity and repetition of the issue. Consolidation was first proposed in 1967, and the first failed attempt occurred in 1974 when building costs more than doubled the expected budget. The building costs associated with the 1974 failure postponed consolidation until a second referendum gave marginal support for the new building in 1989.¹⁰⁶ Thus consolidation was an issue that spanned 25 years.

¹⁰⁴ Berry, "School Consolidation and Inequality," 49.; See Appendix A.

¹⁰⁵ Scribner, *The Fight for Local Control: Schools, Suburbs, and American Democracy*, 36-38.

¹⁰⁶ "Peabody Report due Tuesday," *The News Gazette* (Lexington, VA). 11 Oct. 1967.; Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Revisited: What Went Wrong," *The News Gazette* (Lexington, VA). 4 Mar. 1987.

Additionally, consolidation in Rockbridge occurred much later than the majority of cases, ending in 1992, almost 20 years beyond the main consolidation timeframe. However, the number of school districts in the United States is still declining, and Rockbridge's unique aspects do not detract from the similarities its consolidation has with other rural communities throughout Appalachia, the South, and the Midwestern States.¹⁰⁷

Maintaining community viability requires, “preserv[ing] a degree of local control and respond[ing] to the needs of community members while relating effectively to institutions of the larger society.”¹⁰⁸ Thus the indicators examined reflect citizens' standard of living, political participation, and community action respectively. Indicators are drawn primarily from Hammer's “Rural Education and Rural Community Viability,” measuring aspects of human, social, intellectual, cultural, and physical capital, specifically total population, average income, levels of education, voter turnout, and number of community events, in the affected communities and county-wide.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the change in variety of businesses in the towns of Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield is examined.¹¹⁰ This method relates to Hammer's criterion of physical capital. Analyzing how these indicators change over the course and in the aftermath of Rockbridge's consolidation of high schools reveals the impact of consolidation upon community viability.

Data

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2015: Table 214.10. Number of public school districts and public and private elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2013-14, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_214.10.asp?referrer=report.

¹⁰⁸ Pinkerton and Brown, “Rural Community Viability and Leadership Patterns,” 4.

¹⁰⁹ Hammer, ““Rural Education and Rural Community Viability,” 18.

¹¹⁰ Pinkerton and Brown, “Rural Community Viability and Leadership Patterns,” 7.

Deciding whether or not data indicates that a community is viable hinges on how the community's vitality fits into the context of the surrounding area, and whether its outcomes reflect a sustainable community. A community is viable if community viability indicators are comparable or superior to surrounding areas. Alternatively, when a community faces consistent decline, regardless of national trends, its viability decreases. However, when a locality improves at a slower rate than surrounding areas, it is more challenging to determine the long-term effects of such changes. Despite increasing average incomes, and decreasing school dropout rates, a community is less likely to attract businesses or people if it is lagging behind similar communities. This can threaten community viability because falling behind the average can increase the gap between communities, harming the lower-performing community's projected growth.

Indicators in Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield that remain similar to trends for Rockbridge County is considered maintained viability. Special attention is given to years after 1992, because that was the year consolidation occurred. In the data presented below, the census tracts and magisterial districts around Fairfield and Natural Bridge Station are compared to Rockbridge County as a whole. Data mentioning the South River District refers to northeast Rockbridge County, around Fairfield, VA., and includes the small town of Vesuvius, VA. and the population living just north of Buena Vista, VA. Data mentioning the Natural Bridge District refers to southeast Rockbridge County, and also includes the towns of Glasgow and Natural Bridge along with Natural Bridge Station. Additionally, citizens living south of the city limits of Buena Vista, VA. are also included in this district.¹¹¹ Census data for the individual towns of Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield were not recorded separately from their respective census

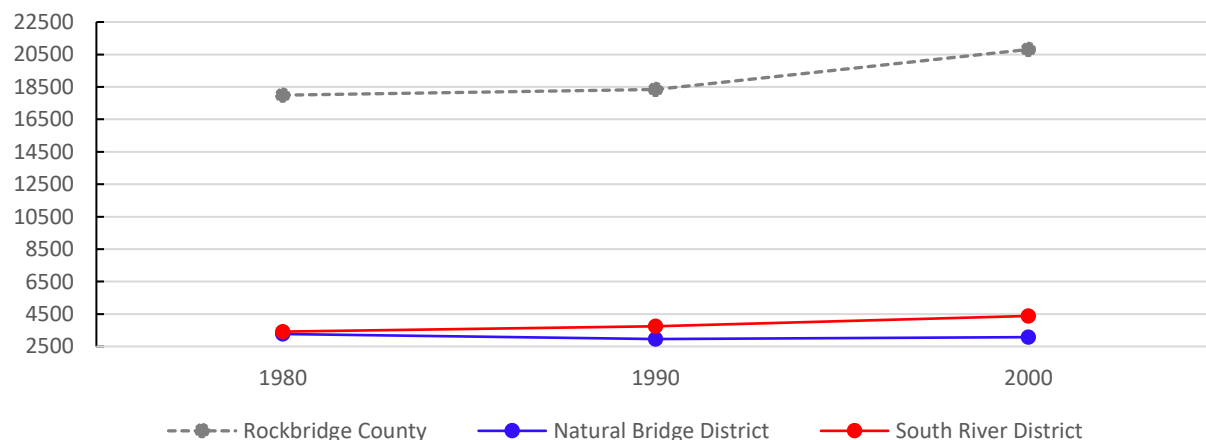
¹¹¹ See Appendix B.

tracts in Population and Housing statistics, and other relevant points of data, making it impossible to view these towns separate from their district in some measurements.

Total Population

A viable community is able to sustain and grow its population, while non-viable communities watch their citizens migrate to other areas. While population is affected by the presence of industry and community events, schools can also have a role in maintaining a community's population, because they serve as social centers that helps unite tie the community together.¹¹²

Table 1: Population Shifts in Rockbridge, the Natural Bridge District and the South River District, 1980 to 2000



Source: U.S. Census Data 1980-2000

As Table 1 shows, population trends for Rockbridge county from 1980-2000 indicate growth particularly after the 1990 census. Since 1990, the overall population has increased from 18,350 to 20,808 residents (a 13.4% jump). Within the South River district, the growth rate was above the county average as the population rose from 3,753 to 4,382 residents (a 16.75% increase). The Natural Bridge district's population growth was more modest, at 3.75% between

¹¹² Alexis DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 55-56, 302-303.

1990 and 2000. What's more concerning, however, is the slight decrease in population between 1980 and 2000 from 3,268 to 3,069 residents.¹¹³

Population growth was consistent for the county before and after consolidation. While both the South River and Natural Bridge districts underperformed compared to the county, there was a growing gap between the two districts' populations. This suggests consolidation could have had different outcomes for the two communities even though they both lost their high schools. Between 1980 and 1990, the Natural Bridge district's population declined, while the South River district's increased at a similar rate to the county. The increasing rift between the South River District and the Natural Bridge District in total population is notable as well, increasing from a gap of 148 (4.3%) in 1980 to 795 (21.18%) in 1990 and to 1461 (33.34%) in 2000.¹¹⁴

Student age population trends differ from total population trends in Rockbridge county. A lack of data in the census record for the South River and Natural Bridge districts renders us unable to compare the districts overtime. However, measuring county-wide shifts in student age populations is useful because it can suggest whether new families are entering an area. Between 1980 and 2000, the total number of county residents between the ages of five and 19 decreased from 4,153 to 3,939 (a 5.15% drop). High school age figures fared much worse, changing from 1,709 to 1,329, (a 22.22% drop).¹¹⁵

¹¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Unit Counts, PHC-3-48, October 2003: 2, 6, 17, 20. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/phc-3-48.pdf>; U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, General Population Characteristics: Virginia 1980, PC80-1-B48, August 1982, 224, https://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980/1980censusofpopu80148uns_bw.pdf; U.S. Census Bureau, County Intercensal Datasets: 2000-2010, Intercensal Estimates of the Resident Population by Five-Year Age Groups and Sex for Counties: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2010, December 2, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/intercensal-2000-2010-counties.html>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*

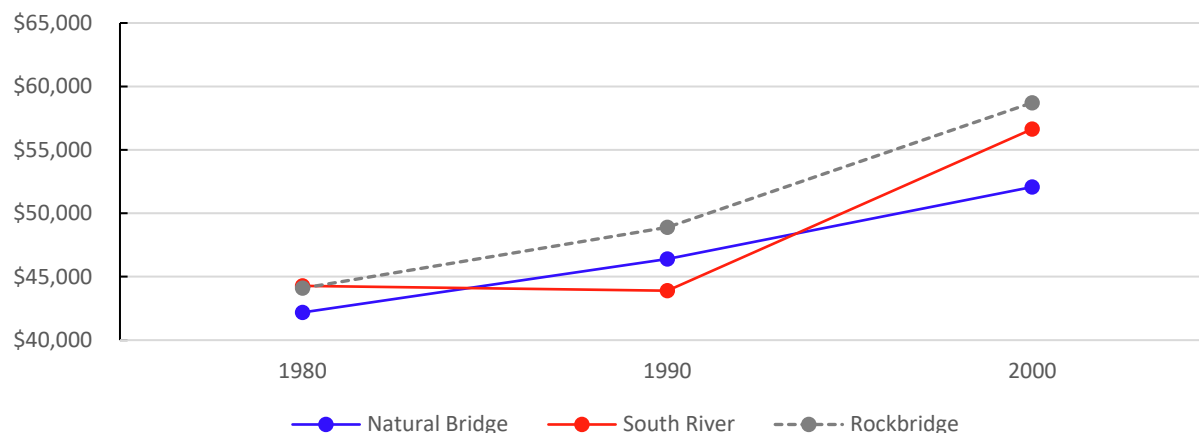
¹¹⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, General Population Characteristics: Virginia 1980, PC80-1-B48, August 1982, 224, https://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980/1980censusofpopu80148uns_bw.pdf; U.S. Census

Consistent declines in student populations are worrying for a local community's viability. It means that an area is failing to attract families with school age children into the area, limiting the potential for county and local growth. Multiple factors influence a family's decision to move to an area including its schools and the standard of living. Thus, examining shifts in other factors of viability is imperative to not only understand the impact of consolidation, but to analyze how they may relate to population totals.

Income

The average household income of a community exhibits its economic prosperity. A rising average household income shows that people who live there accrue wealth, making a community more attractive to live in. In contrast, declines in average household income suggest rising poverty rates and an economically stagnant community. Households with little money are less able to contribute financially towards the community. Since schools are a source of employment, and help educate a community's future job force, losing a community school can affect average household income.

Table 2: Average Annual Household Income (in 2010 Dollars)



Source: Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau Population and Housing 1980-2000

As Table 2 shows, average household income increased in Rockbridge between 1980 and 2000, from a 2010 equivalent of \$44,097 to \$58,715. The South River district had a higher average than the county in 1980 but declined in 1990 despite an increase by the county overall. Between 1990 and 2000, however, the South River district rebounded, with an average of \$56,637, \$2,078 below the county average. The Natural Bridge district's household income increased steadily from 1980 to 2000, from \$42,181 to \$52,071. However, its gap behind the county average widened, with Natural Bridge district residents making \$6,644 less annually.¹¹⁶

Both the Natural Bridge and South River districts increased their average family and household incomes after consolidation occurred. However, they remained below the county average and the Natural Bridge district grew at a slower rate than the rest of the county. The increases in average income are promising, showing residents continue to make financial gains.

¹¹⁶ Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau; Census of Population and Housing, 1980.; Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau; Census of Population and Housing, 1990.; Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau; 2000 Census of Population and Housing.

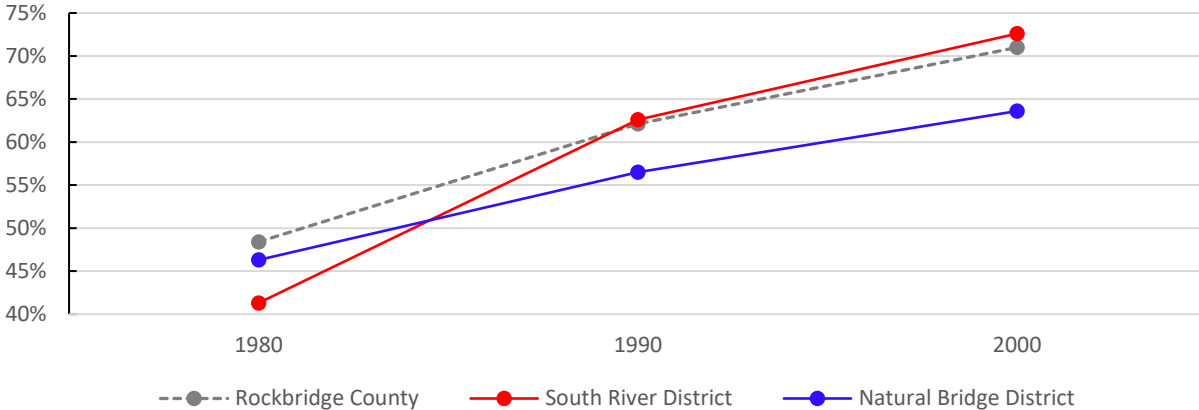
However, lagging behind the county average leaves the South River and Natural Bridge districts in a bind, showing they are unable to compete with the other county districts.

Education

Educational attainment and school dropout trends are the community viability indicators most directly related to the status of the school system and its means of operation. The closure of a school has a direct impact on its students, by forcing them into an unfamiliar learning environment that disrupts the status quo. Table 4 shows that census data for educational attainment in Rockbridge County, along with the South River and Natural Bridge districts increased from 1980 to 2000. County residents who had at least a high school education went from 48% to 71%. The Natural Bridge and South River districts were similar to the county. Around Natural Bridge, educational attainment of a high school diploma or greater rose from 46.3% in 1980 to 63.6% in 2000. Around Fairfield, educational attainment through high school or more skyrocketed from 41.3% in 1980 to 72.6% in 2000.¹¹⁷ Improvement in educational attainment increased slowly at the end of the 20th Century, compared to the decade prior, especially for the South River district.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* Educational attainment data differs in the manner of collection between 1980 and 1990. For the 1980 data points, I used the sum total of the percentage who completed four years of high school and the percentage of those who attended one year of college or more.

Table 3: Education Attainment Rate: High School or More



Source: Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau Population and Housing 1980-2000

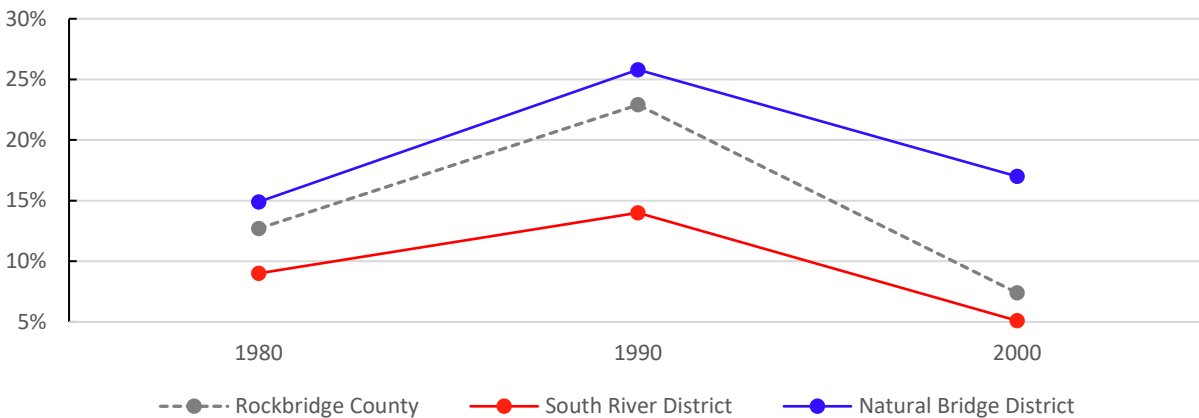
Rockbridge County is extremely close to three higher education institutions—Virginia Military Institute, Washington and Lee University, and Southern Virginia University—and a regional campus for Dabney S. Lancaster Community College. Their presence could contribute to higher levels of educational attainment in general throughout the county.¹¹⁸ Conversely, a community performing below the county average could indicate a disconnect with the rest of the county, with its residents less likely to hold similar jobs or to operate in similar social circles. This separation would isolate the community, making it more likely to decline.

The student dropout rate followed a different, but still positive, trajectory than educational attainment data. Table 5 shows the county’s average dropout rate spiking from 13% to 22.9% between 1980 and 1990 before falling to 7.4%. Like the educational attainment data, both the Natural Bridge and South River districts followed suit. The Natural Bridge district swung from a dropout rate of 14.9% in 1980 to 26%, then back to 17% by 2000. The South River district bounced from 9% to 14 %, then back down to a low 5.1%, surpassing the county

¹¹⁸ Paul Chatterton and John Goddard, “The Response of Higher Education Institutions to Regional Needs,” *European Journal of Education* 35, no. 4 (December, 2000): 486.

average.¹¹⁹ While the South River district significantly reduced its dropout rate, the Natural Bridge district fell significantly behind the county average, with only a modest improvement compared to significant gains by the rest of the county.

Table 4: Student Dropout Rate



Source: Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau Population and Housing 1980-2000

Educational data and trends look promising for the Natural Bridge and South River districts, with improvements in both educational attainment and the student dropout rate. The strongest contrast between them is the South River district's success compared to the county through 2000. The Natural Bridge district remained behind the county average instead for both categories. Additionally, when the student dropout rate improved after 1990, both districts had less drastic improvements than the county, which nearly catches up to the South River district's superior dropout rate. This suggests both districts' at-risk students did not benefit from consolidation like the rest of the county.

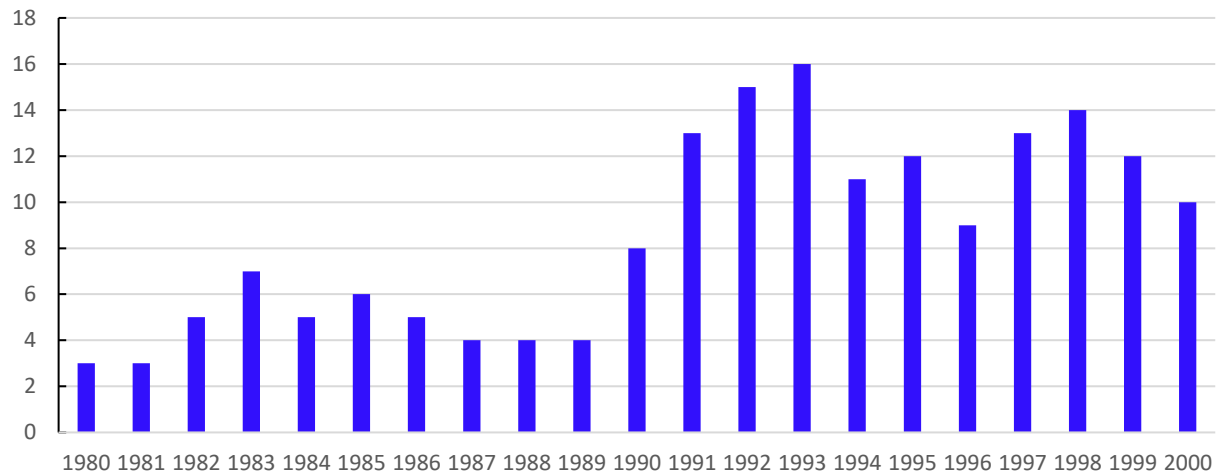
Community Events

¹¹⁹ Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau, 1980; Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau, 1990; Social Explorer, U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

Community events exhibit the vibrancy of a community by drawing individuals to interact and bond with their neighbors in the area. In the case of Rockbridge County, the greatest frequency of community events was in the years prior to consolidation. Before 1989, the number of community events assisted by the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) was seven or less annually. From 1989 to 1993, community events continually increased to a maximum of 16 in one year. Afterwards, Table 6 shows, the number of events steadily declined, falling to 10 per year by 2000.¹²⁰ Since the consolidation took place in 1992, it is notable that the number of community events begins to decline just a year afterwards, without any recovery to 1993 levels. Also, the number of community events that VDOT supported was exceedingly low prior to 1989, the year the referendum to consolidate the schools occurred. Between the decision to consolidate the local high schools to their merger, there was a significant increase in community activity. The social conflict created by consolidation inspired community action, but when consolidation occurred, the cause for community action was gone. If a lack of community events is a sign of a stagnant community, then the conflict of school consolidation paradoxically made the community more vibrant for a few years.

¹²⁰ Rockbridge County Virginia Department of Transportation. County Record. 1980-2000

Table 5: Number of Public Events Conducted With The VDOT Annually



Source: Rockbridge County Virginia Department of Transportation. County Record. 1980-2000

This measure, however, isn't comprehensive because it does not cover all community events. Events that did not obstruct roads didn't require VDOT's assistance and therefore were not recorded. According to Rockbridge County Director of Community Development, Sam Crickenberger, "permitting was pretty loose[sic] back in the day and there is not much of a paper trail. Most events...did not require permits through the Board [of Supervisors]."¹²¹ Thus, the records held by VDOT are the most detailed records of Rockbridge County's community events available.

Business Diversity

When Pinkerton and Brown assessed the viability of 17 rural towns, one of their factors was an eight-point business diversity score, measuring the kinds of industry available in the communities they studied. Their assumption was that a community with a large variety of businesses had greater stability and could more easily maintain its autonomy than one with a

¹²¹ Samuel Crickenberger, Rockbridge County Director of Community Development, email message to the Author, March 13, 2018.

narrow scope of industry. The eight kinds of businesses they considered were hardware stores, clothing stores, pharmacies, banks, hotels, restaurants, car dealerships, and farm equipment dealerships. If a community had at least one business in a given category then the community received a point.¹²²

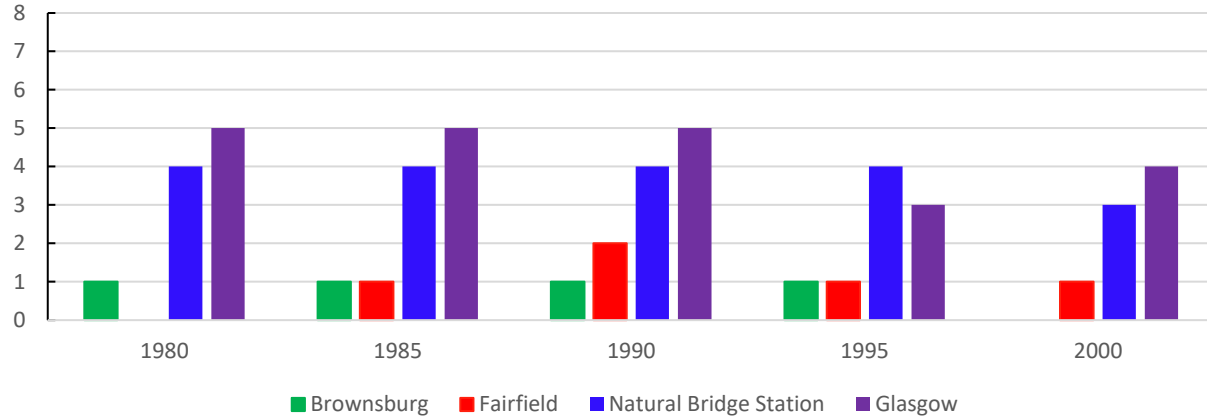
To apply Pinkerton and Brown's methodology to Rockbridge County, I examined the phone directories that serviced the area, and recorded the business diversity scores of Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield for every five years from 1980 to 2000. Additionally, I recorded the business diversity scores of two similar communities, Glasgow and Brownsburg, to provide a comparison between the areas of focus and other parts of the county. If consolidation had an effect on these communities' viability, we would expect to see a decline in their scores after 1990. Table 6 shows that Natural Bridge Station's scores were very stable, only declining a single point, when the area lost its last hotel. The other three points came from the town's restaurant, bank, and hardware store. Glasgow, a mere three miles from Natural Bridge Station, consistently hosted a restaurant, and for most years, a hotel and a hardware store. At various points, it had an auto dealership, a bank, and a pharmacy as well, but these were short-lived industries.

Fairfield's business diversity score was more volatile, starting with zero in 1980, rising to two in 1990, due to a bank and a farm dealership. The dealership was short-lived, disappearing from the telephone directories after 1990, leaving a low business diversity score. This contrasted with Brownsburg, which consistently maintained a bank until that closed shortly before 2000.¹²³

¹²² Pinkerton and Brown, "Rural Community Viability and Leadership Patterns," 7.

¹²³ *Telephone Directory*, (Lexington, Va: Central Telephone Company of Virginia, 1980).; *Telephone Directory*, (Lexington, Va: Central Telephone Company of Virginia, 1985).; *Phone Book*, (Lexington, Va: Central Telephone

Table 6: Business Diversity Scores



Source: Lexington Telephone Directories: 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000.

Given both Fairfield and Natural Bridge Station’s income and educational attainment status, it is interesting to see Natural Bridge Station outperforming Fairfield in business diversity. However, Natural Bridge Station and Glasgow have a greater population density because they are surrounded by mountains. Fairfield and Brownsburg are in a flatter landscape; thus, the buildings in these communities are spread further apart. It is possible that there were other industries that met Pinkerton and Brown’s specifications that resided just outside of the Fairfield and Brownsburg telephone areas. Regardless, the consistent decline in business diversity scores after 1992 reflects poorly upon consolidation’s impact on these communities.

Voter Turnout

Political participation is another aspect of community viability. Successful communities that have higher engagement are likely to have higher voter turnout rates.¹²⁴ Thus, in Rockbridge

Company of Virginia, Donnelly Directory, 1990).; *First Source Phone Book*, (Lexington, Va.: Sprint: Centel-Virginia, 1995).; *Lexington First Source*, (Lexington, Va.: Sprint, 2000).

¹²⁴ Jack McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Patricia Moy, “Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation,” *Political Communication* 16,

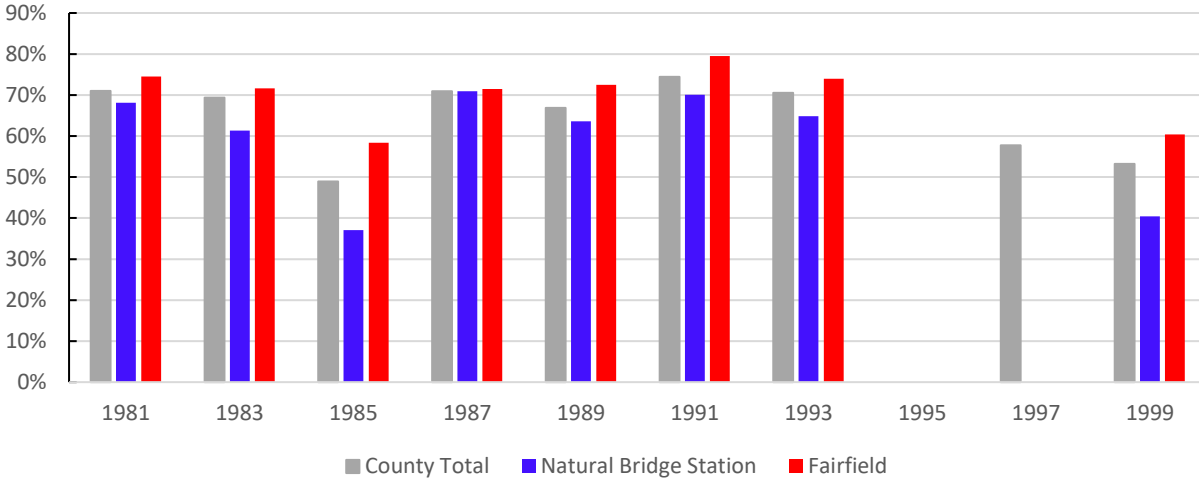
County, if consolidation had a negative effect upon community viability, then we would expect to see declines in voter turnout. Voter turnout trends were consistent across the county in the off-year, Virginia state level elections. Table 7 shows most elections had a range of 65 to 85 percent turnout, with 1985 being a notable exception. Voter turnout after consolidation shows indications of decline, with the county average in 1997 and 1999 reaching 57 and 53 percent respectively. This is surprising, especially since the 1997 and 1999 elections were contested by multiple candidates. For 1999, the stakes were especially high, with Republicans seeking to take the House of Delegates for the first time since Reconstruction.¹²⁵ The county average voter turnout percentage rested in between the Fairfield and Natural Bridge Station voter turnout percentages, with the exception of 1987, where the county turnout and Natural Bridge Station's turnout were an identical 70.9 percent.¹²⁶

no.3 (July-September 1999): 316.; Dietram A. Scheufele, James Shanahan, and Sei-Hill Kim, "Who Cares About Local Politics? Media Influences on Local Political Involvement, Issue Awareness, and Attitude Strength," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 79, no.2 (Summer 2002): 429.

¹²⁵ "1997 House of Delegates General Election: District 18," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, Accessed April 8, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/43202/>; "1997 House of Delegates General Election: District 19," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, Accessed April 8, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/43212/>; "1999 House of Delegates General Election: District 18," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, Accessed April 8, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/63710/>; "1999 House of Delegates General Election: District 19," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, Accessed April 8, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/63711/>; *The News Gazette*, 1997 & 1999.

¹²⁶ Library of Virginia, State Board of Elections: Central Registration Roster System Reports, Record Group 14: accession number 33133, boxes 14-16, 18.; *Ibid*, accession number 34427, boxes 4,5,9-11.; *Ibid*, accession number 35391, box 9.; *Ibid*, accession number 36414, boxes 21, 23.

Table 7: Average Voter Turnout by precinct in House of Delegates Elections 1980-2000



Source: Library of Virginia, State Board of Elections: Central Registration Roster System Reports 1980-2000.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare pre- and post-consolidation voter turnouts, because the precinct data for the 1995 and 1997 elections and county data for 1995 are restricted requiring special permissions for access. We do, however, know the county voter turnout rate for 1997 and the precinct and county rate for 1999. Both indicate a decline from pre-consolidation elections, with Natural Bridge Station falling further behind the county average in 1999, and the Fairfield precinct maintaining an above average turnout.¹²⁷ This suggests that consolidation may have affected the county as a whole, and Natural Bridge Station was more heavily affected. While the 1993 elections occurred after consolidation, the new consolidated school had only been operational for just over two months, making its impact on the 1993 elections minimal at best.

Analysis

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, accession number 41730, boxes 3, 9.; *Ibid*, accession number 41727, boxes 1-2.

Natural Bridge Station

Natural Bridge Station was the community that most vehemently opposed consolidation. When the county school board proposed removing Natural Bridge High School, residents formed the Taxpayers Against Consolidation group to express their concerns with the school board's proposal. They generated a lot of support, with one meeting exceeding 100 attendants. The group held three meetings in total, two of which were held at Natural Bridge High School, and one at Rockbridge High School near Fairfield.¹²⁸

Many attendants were concerned with the way the county proposed consolidation, fearing the school board and board of supervisors did not thoroughly consider other options. Additionally, there were concerns that building the new high school would affect their tax rates, go over budget as a previous attempt did in 1974, affect the education of local residents, affect local population trends, and affect businesses in and around the area. Residents also were tired of working with the city of Lexington, having just settled a prolonged revenue sharing agreement dispute. Comments against the proposed school's location near the city and away from Natural Bridge receiving ample applause. This eventually led to a failed proposal to remove county students from Lexington High School and build additions to the Rockbridge and Natural Bridge school properties.¹²⁹

When residents voted in a referendum on consolidating the schools, the Natural Bridge precinct recorded more "no" votes than any other precinct in the county. Additionally, voter turnout in the Natural Bridge district's precincts were higher than most others.¹³⁰ The voters of

¹²⁸ Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Draws Local Opposition," *The News Gazette*, February 18, 1987.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*; Darryl Woodson, "Group Organizes to Oppose Consolidation," *The News Gazette*, February 11, 1987.; Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Report Gets Mixed Reviews," *The News Gazette*, May 25, 1988.; See Appendix C.

¹³⁰ Darryl Woodson, "YES! School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted," *The News Gazette*, April 5, 1989.; See Appendix D.

Natural Bridge consistently took a strong stance against consolidation. They had good reason to, for many of their concerns became a reality.

While changes in community viability indicators were mixed for Natural Bridge Station, there was a consistent pattern of falling behind the county average in most instances. The Natural Bridge district performed worse than the county average in the growth of population, average household income, and educational attainment. Changes in the student dropout rate were less impressive after 1990 for the Natural Bridge district than the county average as well. Additionally, there was a slight decline in business diversity, and voter turnout in Natural Bridge Station after 1992. All measured indicators of community viability show that the Natural Bridge area lost ground to the rest of the county after consolidation. Overall, consolidation correlated with a decline in community viability within Natural Bridge Station. Its residents were right to be concerned about the closure of their school.

Fairfield

Residents in Fairfield were less vocal regarding consolidation than their Natural Bridge counterparts. However, they still expressed discontent with the plans to consolidate the high schools. Along with the one Taxpayers Against Consolidation meeting in Rockbridge High School, Fairfield residents used the press and public forums to express their views. In one letter, Harold Dodson wrote to *The News Gazette* saying the process towards consolidation and the referendum were moving too swiftly and risked poor execution.¹³¹ In an open forum at Rockbridge High School, residents from the northern end of the county, including Fairfield,

¹³¹ Harold L. Dodson, "Says Referendum Should Be Delayed," *The News Gazette*, March 29, 1989

Brownsburg, and Goshen had mixed views, with some supporting it, and others harboring the same reservations as Natural Bridge residents.¹³²

Essentially, there were fewer concerned about consolidation in Fairfield than in Natural Bridge Station, but those who opposed the merger did so due to fears of increased taxation, educational decline, population decline, and an atrophy of industry. This was reflected in the referendum on constructing the new school, with a higher than average turnout than the rest of the county, but less than Natural Bridge, Glasgow, Rockbridge Baths, Effinger, and Rockbridge High precincts. It is important to note, however, that the Rockbridge High School building resides outside of the Fairfield precinct, just inside the boundaries of the Rockbridge High precinct.¹³³

Changes in community viability indicators were mixed for Fairfield and the greater South River District area. There were some areas where the county lagged behind the South River District after consolidation, namely in the growth of population, income, educational attainment, and voter turnout. However, there were still some areas where Fairfield, and the rest of the South River district showed decline. The student dropout rate, although improving after 1990, showed that the county's improvements were mostly from other districts, nearly catching up to the South River District average. Business diversity was also an area where Fairfield declined, losing its farm dealership business by 1995. Overall, Fairfield was able to keep pace with the rest of the county in most areas, showing that consolidation correlated with only some decline in community viability within the Fairfield community.

¹³² Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Report Gets Mixed Reviews," *The News Gazette*, May 25, 1988.

¹³³ Darryl Woodson, "YES! School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted," *The News Gazette*, April 5, 1989.

The different ways consolidation affected Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield may have to do with the distance these communities were from their perspective schools. Natural Bridge High School was located within Natural Bridge Station, surrounded by houses, businesses, and other structures in close proximity. Fairfield, in contrast, although the closest community to Rockbridge High School, was nearly three miles away. Rockbridge High School was surrounded by farmland. This distance could have made the impact of the closure less pronounced in Fairfield, as student populations and school employees were likely to live further away. This would make it more challenging for the Fairfield community to develop attachment to Rockbridge High School.¹³⁴

Conclusion

The consolidation of high schools in Rockbridge County in 1992 had an adverse effect upon the communities of Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield. While these communities still saw improvements in their population, income, educational attainment and student dropout rate, both decline in some of these areas in relation to the rest of the county. Declines in business diversity were also an issue for Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield after 1992, with these areas losing farm dealership and hotels. The county as a whole faced a decline in voter turnout and community events after consolidation, suggesting the impact of consolidation policy could have reached beyond Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield.

One hope of this study was to also analyze the relation between land value changes and school consolidation. However, at this time data regarding the land area of Rockbridge County's

¹³⁴ Avery M. Guest and Barrett A. Lee, "Sentiment and Evaluation as Ecological Variables," *Sociological Perspectives* 26, no.2 (April 1983): 174-175. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.2307/1389089>.

magisterial districts is unavailable. Observing the changes in land value in different districts may help reveal whether consolidation correlated with a decline in the land value of the Natural Bridge and South River districts.

Since many school consolidations between 1920 and 1970 were from rural areas, it is concerning to see consolidation correlating with declines in community viability within the context of these rural Appalachian communities. Even giving residents the ability to decide on whether to fund consolidation did not result in improvement for both communities. Instead it emphasized the divide in Rockbridge county, with only a 30-vote difference in the referendum results.¹³⁵ The changes in community viability indicators for Fairfield and Natural Bridge Station suggest that the policy of school consolidation tends to negatively affect rural communities that lose their schools rather than help them.

¹³⁵ Darryl Woodson, "YES! School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted," *The News Gazette*, April 5, 1989.

Championing the Soapbox:

The Impact of Local Media Coverage on Civic Engagement in Rockbridge County

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Introduction

When the Rockbridge County School board deliberated over consolidating its high schools, *The News Gazette* was the main public source of information. Over the course of three years, Lexington, Virginia's weekly paper issued over 120 consolidation focused articles, ranging from schoolboard action to budget figures, and from community protest groups to referendum tallies. The paper also printed dozens of letters written to the editor, representing a plethora of views regarding the school merger. *The News Gazette* was an influential source and motivated many to participate politically by serving as the community's sound board. Its quality of coverage makes this case a prime example for analyzing the impact of local print media on civic engagement and voting participation. However, *The News Gazette* failed to inspire an increase in civic engagement with the consolidation issue in Rockbridge County. Despite *The News Gazette*'s extensive news coverage, voter turnout on the referendum to fund the new school indicated a decline in voter participation and civic engagement regarding the issue was weaker compared to local House of Delegates elections from 1981 to 1999, questioning Hayes and Lawless' contention that local print media is what fosters civic engagement in a community.¹³⁶

Review of Literature

The role of news media in American culture is to contribute to democratic society through informing the American public of current events and holding accountable institutions entrusted with governance. Despite some disillusionment among journalists, this role remains as

¹³⁶ Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, "The Decline of Local News and its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 1 (January 2018): 332-336. <https://doi-org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/10.1086/694105>.

the news media's primary focus.¹³⁷ The secondary role of the media is to exemplify and encourage social associations that preserve democratic government, which is done through informing the people. Alexis De Tocqueville, in his early commentary on U.S. government and society, regarded social associations as one of the main factors that ensure successful democratic government.¹³⁸ If De Tocqueville's analysis is true, then Putnam's observation in *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital* paints a bleak picture of the viability of public associations, with socialization shedding its community-oriented focus since the 1960s, and online means of connection doing little to fill the void.¹³⁹ Given the news media's role regarding associations and democracy, it is evident that building on individuals' community ties and involvement are the benefits of effective news media. However, the link between local media and civic engagement is not obvious. It is important to define these terms in order to determine how local print media can translate to political and civic action.

Local news is essential to stay informed of community events by providing consumers social and political knowledge.¹⁴⁰ Scholars who agree with De Tocqueville's and Putnam's views of social institutions have found these forms of knowledge are related to increased civic engagement, political participation, and community involvement.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Michael Schudson, *The Power of News*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 204-206.

¹³⁸ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer, (New York, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1969): 509-513, 517-520.

¹³⁹ Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January, 1995): 65-78. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/16643>.

¹⁴⁰ Lee Shaker, "Dead Newspapers and Citizens' Civic Engagement," *Political Communication* 31, no.1 (January-March 2014):133.; Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin, "What Do We Mean by 'Civic Engagement'," *Journal of Transformative Education* 3, no. 3 (July 2005): 238. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1541344605276792>.

¹⁴¹ Alan S. Gerber, Dean Karlan, and Daniel Bergan, "Does The Media Matter? A Field Experiment Measuring the Effect of Newspapers on Voting Behavior and Political Opinions," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 1, no. 2 (April 2009): 47.; Naewon Kang and Nojin Kwak. "A Multilevel Approach to Civic Participation: Individual Length of Residence, Neighborhood Residential Stability, and Their Interactive Effects with Media Use," *Communication Research* 30, no.1 (February 2003): 84. <http://journals.sagepub.com.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0093650202239028>.; Jack McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Patricia Moy, "Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and

Local media coverage has been connected to civic engagement primarily through surveys of newspaper usage and subsequent participation in a variety of civic activities or quasi-experiments.¹⁴² One major example is Gerber, Karlan, and Bergen's analysis where they issued free short subscriptions to the *Washington Times* and *Washington Post*, and found that groups receiving the free newspapers were more likely to vote than the control group.¹⁴³ Because of the broad scope of the terms "civics" and "engagement", the definition of civic engagement has also varied among scholars. While some studies define most kinds social interaction as civic engagement, others are narrower, only accepting some forms of political participation, such as voting and political canvassing.¹⁴⁴ Eckman and Amnå gave a concrete description of civic engagement by fitting it in the middle a spectrum ranging from disengagement to "manifest political participation". Their model described civic engagement as public action that was not necessarily political and gave specific attributes to it, such as writing to an editor or working for a charity.¹⁴⁵ In "What Do We Mean by 'Civic Engagement'", Adler and Goggin prescribed 19 actions characteristic of civic engagement, such as fundraising for charity, voting, and contacting the print media.¹⁴⁶ While its definition has varied, scholars have attempted to more thoroughly

Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation," *Political Communication* 16, no.3 (July-September 1999): 317.; Patricia Moy, et. al. "Political Correlates of Local News Media Use." *Journal of Communication* 54, no.3 (September 2004): 540. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/doi/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02643.x/epdf>.

¹⁴² Hans Martens and Renee Hobs. "How Media Literacy Supports Civic Engagement in a Digital Age." *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 23, no. 2 (April-June 2015):125-126. *EBSCO Host*.; Shaker, "Dead Newspapers and Citizens' Civic Engagement," 133-134, 143; Alan S. Gerber, "Does The Media Matter? A Field Experiment Measuring the Effect of Newspapers on Voting Behavior and Political Opinions," 36-37.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁴ Margaret Brabant and Donald Braid. "The Devil is in the Details: Defining Civic Engagement." *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 13, no. 2 (June 2009): 66. Accessed February 27, 2018. <http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe/article/view/80>.; Julie A. Hatcher, "Assessing Civic Knowledge and Engagement." *New Directions for Institutional Research*, no. 149 (Spring 2011): 82-83.; Richard P. Adler, "What Do We Mean by 'Civic Engagement'," 238-239, 242.

¹⁴⁵ Joakim Eckman and Erik Amnå. "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology." *Post Disciplinary Humanities and Social Sciences Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (June 2012): 292, 295. <https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/humaff.2012.22.issue-3/s13374-012-0024-1/s13374-012-0024-1.pdf>.

¹⁴⁶ Richard P. Adler. "What Do We Mean by 'Civic Engagement'," 242.

describe civic engagement, giving it both political and apolitical attributes. Because civic engagement is closely related to political participation, understanding their connection to local media also needs consideration.

Voting is a prime example of political participation, because through it the individual can critique the performance of a current government and provide their perspective on governmental policy. Like civic engagement, communications and mass media scholars attribute local media consumption to an increase in an individual's political participation.¹⁴⁷ However, Local media consumption seems to be only part of the cause; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy determined that both motivation to act and a knowledge of events and issues are essential.¹⁴⁸ A local newspaper can provide both motivation and political knowledge, but part of the drive to participate politically rests in one's own inclinations. However, there are few studies that examine communities as a whole, since the bulk of analysis in this field relies heavily on surveys and small-scale experiments.

Political participation is easier to define than civic engagement, since only political forms of action are accepted. Eckman and Amnå divide it into formal participation and action, with formal participation including voting, contacting a representative, running for office, or party membership, and action ranging from boycotting and protesting to civil disobedience and political violence.¹⁴⁹ While civic engagement and political participation are the manifestations

¹⁴⁷ Patricia Moy, et. al. "Political Correlates of Local News Media Use," 540.; Jack McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Patricia Moy, "Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation," 316; Naewon Kang and Nojin Kwak. "A Multilevel Approach to Civic Participation: Individual Length of Residence, Neighborhood Residential Stability, and Their Interactive Effects with Media Use," 434.; Dietram A. Scheufele, James Shanahan, and Sei-Hill Kim. "Who Cares About Local Politics? Media Influences on Local Political Involvement, Issue Awareness, and Attitude Strength," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 79, no.2 (Summer 2002): 429, 434.

¹⁴⁸ Jack McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Patricia Moy, "Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation," 316.

¹⁴⁹ Joakim Eckman and Erik Amnå. "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," 295.

of an effective local media, they are merely the symptoms of a greater community connection in relation to local issues. Community integration and involvement are essential in translating what is read and watched into civic and political action.

Local print media has been a lifeline for rural communities to stay socially connected. By informing residents of what is occurring around them, it can inspire action in those who are well-connected to their community. While it is clear that local news consumption is related to community involvement, defining it has been a challenge for communications scholars.¹⁵⁰ What makes it difficult is that there are many similar terms with undefined breadth such as community attachment, community integration, and community ties.¹⁵¹ McLeod, frustrated by this ambiguity, remarked, “[t]he concept of community integration seems to be like the concept of obscenity—everyone knows what it is, but no one can actually define it.”¹⁵² That being said, for the purposes of any study analyzing the effect of local news media on its community, it is essential to define community involvement in detail. Eckman and Amnå attempted to define involvement within their engagement spectrum. They described social involvement as the most basic form of civil and “latent” political participation, and attributed actions to it like perceiving

¹⁵⁰ Christopher Ali. *Media Localism: The Policies of Place*, (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2017) 40. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/jhu/detail.action?jsessionid=qwa6fiuzxqp01ge1czujn2ggs?docID=4806669>.; Lindsay Hoffman and William Eveland, “Assessing Causality in the Relationship Between Community Attachment and Local News Media Use,” *Mass Communication and Society* 13, no.2 (Apr.-Jun. 2010): 181,192. *Ebsco Host*.; Jack McLeod, et. al. “Community Integration, Local Media Use, and Democratic Processes,” *Communication Research* 23, no. 2 (April 1, 1996): 187-189. <https://doi-org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/10.1177/009365096023002002>.; Dietram A. Sheufele, James Shanahan, and Sei-Hill Kim. “Who Cares About Local Politics? Media Influences on Local Political Involvement, Issue Awareness, and Attitude Strength,” 434.

¹⁵¹ Hayes and Lawless, “The Decline of Local News and its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data,” 332-333.; Andrea, Kavanaugh, et. al, “Encouraging Civic Participation Through Local News Aggregation,” *Information Polity* 19, no. 2 (2014): 36. *Ebsco Host*.; Lindsay Hoffman and William Eveland, “Assessing Causality in the Relationship Between Community Attachment and Local News Media Use,” 176-177.; Jack McLeod, et. al. “Community Integration, Local Media Use, and Democratic Processes,” 180-181.; Eric Rothenbuhler, et. al., “Communication, Community Attachment, and Involvement,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no.2 (Summer, 1996): 446-447.; Kieth R. Stamm, Arthur G. Emig, and Michael B. Hesse, “The Contribution of Local Media to Community Involvement,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 98.

¹⁵² McLeod, et. al., “Community Integration, Local Media Use, and Democratic Processes,” 180-181.

politics as important, identifying with a social group, and life-style related involvement such as music or clothing choices.¹⁵³ Despite definitional issues, several studies have been able to analyze the impact of local media on community involvement, determining that effective print media correlates with increased community attachment, involvement, and greater community participation.¹⁵⁴

McLeod, Sheufele, and Moy described community involvement as the basis for participation upon which local media can inform and inspire motivation.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, Sheufele, Shanahan, and Kim, by means of a telephone survey, determined, “[c]ommunity integration can be understood as a necessary condition or at least an important prerequisite for local political participation.”¹⁵⁶ Community involvement is inseparable from civic engagement and political participation because they do not manifest individually. It is challenging for a person be engaged in politics or government if they are not a part of the same community.

While the study of mass communications in a local context has struggled with defining terms and categorizing action, two things have become clear in recent research. First, local news media has a positive effect on political participation and civic engagement. Second, community involvement is an essential element in translating local news media reports into civil and political

¹⁵³ Joakim Eckman and Erik Amnå. “Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology,” 295.

¹⁵⁴ David Baines, “Hyper-Local News: A Guide to Hold Rural Communities Together?,” *Local Economy* 27, no. 2 (2012): 154. <https://doi-org.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/10.1177/0269094211428860>; Hayes and Lawless, “The Decline of Local News and its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data,” 332-333; Christopher Ali, *Media Localism: The Policies of Place*, 17.; Hoffman and Eveland, “Assessing Causality in the Relationship Between Community Attachment and Local News Media Use,” 192.; McLeod, et. al., “Community Integration, Local Media Use, and Democratic Processes,” 188.; Rothenbuhler, 448, 458.; Stamm, Emig, and Hesse, “The Contribution of Local Media to Community Involvement,” 98.; Chih-Hui Lai and Tang, “Understanding local news consumption and community participation via the lens of information repertoires and media multiplexity,” *Mass Communication and Society* 18, no.3 (May 2015): 339, 342.

¹⁵⁵ Jack McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Patricia Moy, “Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation,” 316.

¹⁵⁶ Dietram A. Sheufele, James Shanahan, and Sei-Hill Kim. “Who Cares About Local Politics? Media Influences on Local Political Involvement, Issue Awareness, and Attitude Strength,” 429.

action. If both of these are all true, then effective local print media coverage of an event that is of interest to the community will result in increased local action.

Methodology

To study the effects of local print media coverage on civic engagement and political participation, I examine *The News Gazette*'s coverage of a referendum in 1989 to consolidate three local high schools in Rockbridge County and Lexington, VA and the voter turnout of the referendum in relation to house of delegates races in the county from 1980 to 2000. While most media analyses are in the form of surveys, experiments, or a combination between the two, a case study is beneficial by showing the relation between variables in ways that experiments and surveys would struggle to delineate.¹⁵⁷ A case study can more adequately answer why things occur than surveys or experiments.

Rockbridge County was chosen as a case study for five reasons. First, it provided ample coverage leading up to the referendum for consolidating schools, thus becoming the primary source of information for the issue. Second, *The News Gazette* is the only local paper for the area, making it easier to determine the impact of its coverage. Third, because consolidation was an issue of great value to the communities in Rockbridge County, indicators of engagement and participation are likely to be more pronounced, making this case a likely candidate for analysis. Fourth, this case allows for longitudinal coverage on the effects of local media. Comparing reports of local engagement on other issues, such as House of Delegates elections, to the lead-up to consolidation along with voter turnout in those elections to the referendum's turnout would

¹⁵⁷ Shanto Iyengar, *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007): 234-240.; Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997): 54-55.

reveal how the varying intensity of local media coverage relates to political participation and civic engagement over time. Finally, there are relatively few lingering variables. Because Rockbridge County is a rural area on the eastern fringe of the Appalachian region, outside coverage and influence upon consolidation was minimal, aside from a report by the Division of Surveys and Field Services of the George Peabody College, which first recommended consolidation in 1967.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, other sources of information within county regarding consolidation were minimal, consisting mainly of the school board itself, the county board of supervisors, and local interest groups, all of which depended on *The News Gazette* to articulate their message to the public. Essentially, the consolidation issue in the context of a small rural county where one local paper predominates is an ideal scenario for testing local media's impact on civic engagement and voter participation.

This study tests Hayes and Lawless' assumption that local print media coverage sustains civic engagement and political participation.¹⁵⁹ If the assumption holds true, then in the context of consolidation in Rockbridge county, political participation and civic engagement will not decline compared to other local events. Measures for civic engagement and political participation will be derived from Eckman and Amnå's spectrum due to its consideration of civic engagement, community involvement, and political participation. Of the indicators they list, letters written to the editor is the most applicable sign of engagement to examine. Additionally, the frequency of local informational forums and related interest group events are counted for measuring levels of civic engagement. Political participation is measured through comparing the voter turnout rate of the consolidation referendum to the rate for the House of Delegates races. All of these indicators

¹⁵⁸ "Peabody Report Calls for Unification of Three School Systems," *The News Gazette* (Lexington, VA). 18 Oct. 1967.

¹⁵⁹ Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, "The Decline of Local News and its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data," 332-336.

were selected partly from the ability to measure these with public data retroactively and from their mention in other studies outlining indicators of civic engagement and political participation.¹⁶⁰

Data

To examine *The News Gazette's* rate of coverage, community responses to the Virginia House of Delegates campaigns, and developments leading up to the referendum of consolidation, I read 589 issues of *The News Gazette*. To ensure the articles of interest remained relevant to the topics of study, I only considered those that were published the year of a House of Delegates election, about 10 months of coverage, or, in the case of consolidation, published during or after 1986, and prior to the referendum at the beginning of April 1989, a duration of 39 months. Then, I averaged the number of topical articles to the months of coverage. For example, in 1983 there were 22 articles related to the House of Delegates candidates from January through October prior to election day. That average would therefore be 2.2 articles per month.¹⁶¹ I did the same thing with relevant letters written to the editor, and reported events that the community participated in, such as public debates, forums, protests, public meetings, and activities, that were related either to the delegate campaigns or to the consolidation issue. Then I took *The News Gazette's* subscription and number of copies purchased to observe whether there was a correlation between

¹⁶⁰ Jack McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Patricia Moy, "Community, Communication, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation," 316.; Joakim Eckman and Erik Amnå. "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," 295.; Richard P. Adler. "What Do We Mean by 'Civic Engagement'," 242.; Julie A. Hatcher, "Assessing Civic Knowledge and Engagement," 83.

¹⁶¹ The reason why I included the early months the year of the House of Delegates Elections, was because the General Assembly met from January through February, providing the incumbents media coverage that could be relevant to the subsequent election. Additionally, in some years, candidates would announce their reelection bids as early as late February. I included the early months of 1986 for the portion of my study related to the consolidation issue because the issue has been perennial in Rockbridge County, starting in 1967 with multiple points of high and low interest. 1986 was the year interest in consolidation began to pick up in the drive that would carry it to fruition.

these topics and interest in the paper. If paper coverage does correlate with civic engagement and voter participation, then we would see an increase in letters submitted to the editor, relevant community events, and newspaper subscriptions or purchases, when or, in the case of the subscription rates, immediately after an increase in coverage by *The News Gazette*. Conversely, a decline in coverage would result in a decline in these measures. To assess voter participation's relation to print media coverage, I compiled the average voter turnout for the county during the years of study for the delegates races and for the referendum. Like the measures of civic engagement, the correlations should be positive if greater coverage is related to greater participation and vice versa.

The News Gazette's Coverage of Elections and Issues

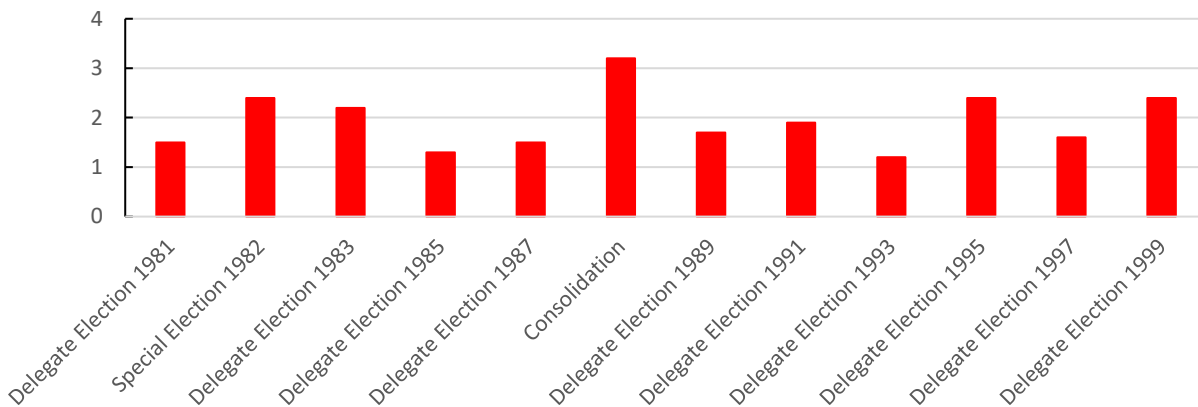
Coverage in state level elections tended to increase when an election had two or more candidates vying for office. The 1982 special election for the House of Delegates received ample coverage, 2.4 articles per month, compared to most other elections because of the controversy county redistricting caused.¹⁶² The county was split among two delegate areas, with one part connected to neighboring Bedford County along with Franklin County and the other tethered to Amherst county. Additionally, Nanalou Sauder was a county native running for one of the delegate seats, generating greater interest in that race.¹⁶³ The 1999 election had equal coverage to the 1982 race because of the race's implications. If Republicans were successful, they would control the Virginia House of Delegates for the first time since reconstruction, and the party in control of the state legislature had more authority in the impending redistricting session in the

¹⁶² *The News Gazette*, 1981-1999.

¹⁶³ "County Loses Battle on Redistricting," *The News Gazette*, January 13, 1982.

21st century.¹⁶⁴ Table 8 shows that coverage of the consolidation issue dwarfed all of the elections in the coverage they received, with an average of 3.2 articles per month, giving credence to the fact that it was an issue that had heavy implications upon the county's citizens.

Table 8: Mean Number of Election or Consolidation Related Articles Per Month



Source: *The News Gazette*, Lexington, Virginia, 1981-1999.

The coverage of consolidation, although pervasive, could hardly infringe upon the delegates elections that occurred concurrently. While both delegate races and consolidation were wholly local affairs, the roles of state legislatures did not include the fate of the local high schools. That was a matter for the school board and board of supervisors. Additionally, like the delegate elections, the consolidation issue was perennial, starting in 1967 with a professional recommendation for consolidation, continuing to 1974 when consolidation was passed but building costs exceeded the budget, and then again in 1986.¹⁶⁵ By the 1980s, consolidation was a regular issue for county citizens, thus impacting the delegate campaigns minimally.

Because consolidation received a greater density of news coverage, we can expect to see significantly greater political participation and civic engagement throughout the rest of the data provided Hayes and Lawless' assumptions hold true to this case. Conversely, if the citizens of

¹⁶⁴ Ed Smith, "Dennis Dampens Holiday Events," *The News Gazette*, September 6, 1999.

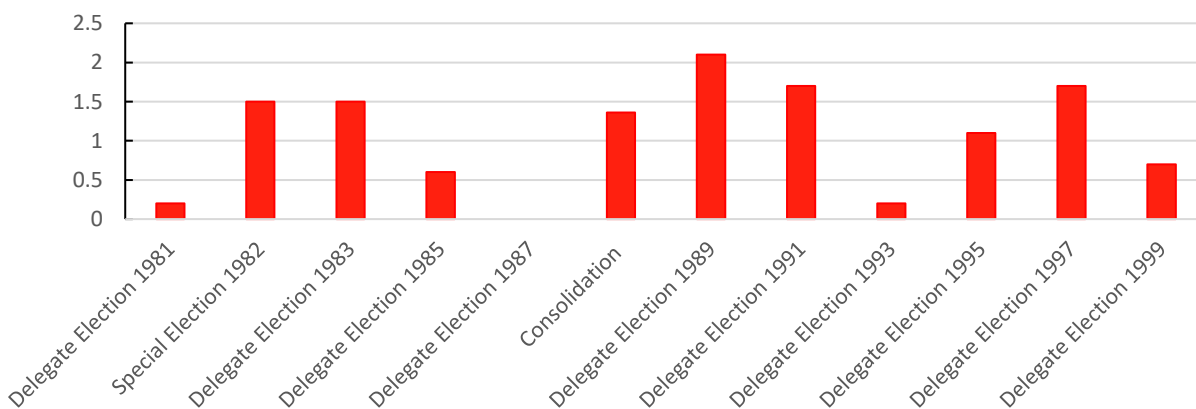
¹⁶⁵ "Peabody Report Calls for Unification of Three School Systems," *The News Gazette*, 18 Oct. 1967.; Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Revisited: What Went Wrong," *The News Gazette*, 4 Mar. 1987.

Rockbridge county were more active with the House of Delegates elections, then the correlation between local print media coverage and civic engagement would be questionable in this case.

Community Engagement: In Writing and Practice

To measure civic engagement, I examined letters written to the editor in *The News Gazette* and the number of public events the paper reported that were relevant to consolidation or the campaigns of study. For the letters, I took the number that were related to either the school consolidation or an upcoming House of Delegates election and divided that by the total months of coverage. Letters to the editor came in spurts of activity, often concentrated around announcements for candidacy and the two weeks prior to an election or referendum. According to Table 9, the 1989 House of Delegates election had the greatest concentration of letters per month, with 2.1, followed by the campaigns in 1997, 1991, 1982, and 1983 respectively. Consolidation took sixth with an average of 1.28 letters per month. The 1981, 1987, and 1993 elections all consisted of unopposed campaigns.¹⁶⁶

Table 9: Mean Number of Related Letters Written to the Editor Per Month



Source: *The News Gazette*, Lexington, Virginia, 1981-1999.

¹⁶⁶ *The News Gazette*, 1981-1999.

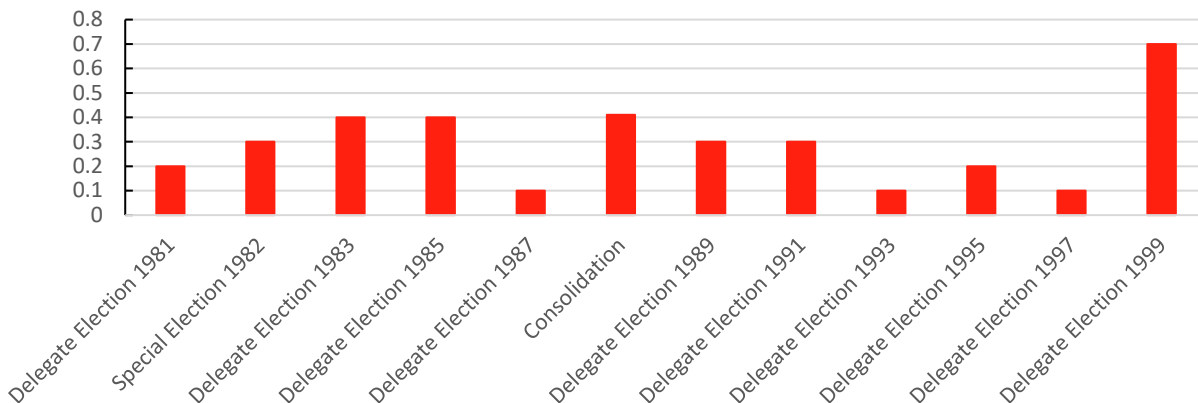
The wide ranges in the number of letters people sent reveal reduced engagement with the consolidation issue, compared to roughly half of the House of Delegates races that took place within the same twenty years. While it is no surprise that non-contested elections elicited few responses from writers, the lack of engagement with the 1999 election was relatively comparable, which is surprising since Rockbridge county was split into three delegate districts, most of which were contested elections. The ramifications for these elections were relatively high stakes—with redistricting and the prospect of Republicans assuming a long-awaited control of the house, as well as each having an incumbent from a different party, one Democrat, one Republican, and one Independent. The general pattern depended more on whether the elections were contested rather than how much coverage *The News Gazette* provided.¹⁶⁷

For community events I took the number that occurred which were related to either a House of Delegates race or consolidation and divided that by the total months of coverage for the related topic. In Table 10, The 1999 House of Delegates campaign was the most active, with numerous issue forums and candidate discussions in public. The consistent event that was relevant to all campaigns, except the consolidation referendum, was the Buena Vista Labor Day parade. This parade gave state and local candidates a public platform to discuss the issues. It was widely attended, garnering attention from Gubernatorial, Senatorial, Local, House, and Delegate candidates. It also was the sole event where the 1987, 1993, and 1997 delegate candidates were

¹⁶⁷ “1999 House of Delegates General Election: District 18.” *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*. Accessed April 8, 2018. <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/63710/>; “1999 House of Delegates General Election: District 19.” *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*. Accessed April 8, 2018. <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/63711/>; *The News Gazette*, 1999.

participants and *The News Gazette* reported it.¹⁶⁸

Table 10: Mean Number of Related Events Reported Per Month



Source: *The News Gazette*, Lexington, Virginia, 1981-1999.

The 1999 election had significantly more forums for candidate and citizen interaction. However, more of these events were held on the candidates' terms, and only a few were held by independent institutions, or were actual debates.¹⁶⁹ The consolidation issue garnered significant public action. When the Rockbridge county school board announced plans to consolidate its high schools, it held multiple "hearings" so that citizens could learn about the school board's thoughts and progress.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, interest groups formed and held meetings to express their opinion. The Taxpayers Against Consolidation held multiple meetings expressing concerns about the financial impact of consolidating the high schools.¹⁷¹ However, the public engagement with the consolidation issue was marginally greater than the delegates elections of 1983 and 1985, with .41 events per month, compared to .40 for both elections. Additionally, the frequency of events related to consolidation paled in comparison to the 1999 election, with a frequency of almost double. The 1985 House of Delegates election is also notable because it received marginal

¹⁶⁸ *The News Gazette*, 1981-1999.

¹⁶⁹ *The News Gazette*, 1999.

¹⁷⁰ Darryl Woodson, "Consolidation Input Mixed at Hearings," *The News Gazette*. Jan 21, 1987.

¹⁷¹ Darryl Woodson, "Group Organizes to Oppose Consolidation," *The News Gazette*. Feb. 11 1987.

coverage compared to the other elections, with 1.3 articles per month; yet there were more public events for citizens to engage with in 1985 than in contested elections such as the 1982 and 1997 campaigns.¹⁷²

The disparities between the coverage *The News Gazette* gave to political contests between 1980 and 2000 and how the citizens of Rockbridge county engaged with these contests question the correlation between local print media coverage and civic engagement. While it is expected that the public is less eager to engage with uncontested elections, anomalies such as engagement with consolidation and the 1999 House of Delegates campaign are still relevant counter-points. Since voter participation is supposed to be closely linked to civic engagement and local media coverage, it will be interesting to see which it relates to more closely in this context.

Political Participation: Getting Out the Vote

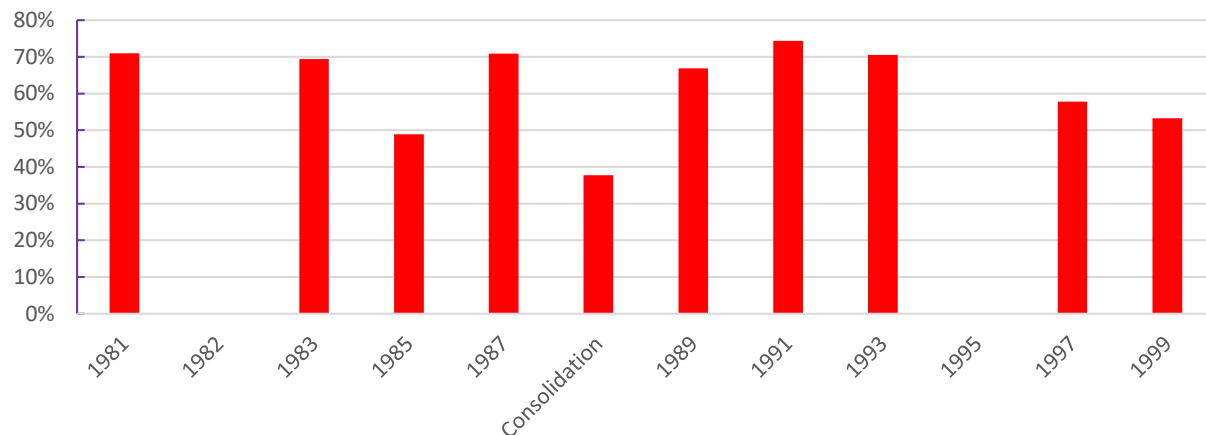
Most elections garnered a turnout rate between 60 and 75 percent between 1980 and 2000. The vote with the lowest turnout was the consolidation referendum, with a county wide rate of 37.7%.¹⁷³ In contrast, the election with the greatest turnout was in 1991, with 74.4% of registered county voters voting. According to Table 11, it outperformed elections that had higher profile races, such as the gubernatorial elections of 1981, 1985, 1989, 1991 and 1999. The 1982 special election and the 1995 house of delegates election did not have voter turnout reports available. In the case of 1982, the Library of Virginia State Records Center did not maintain a

¹⁷² *The News Gazette*, 1981-1999.

¹⁷³ "Yes! School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted." *The News Gazette*, 5 Apr. 1989.

record of the 1982 special election. The 1995 House of Delegate results were restricted due to being stored with sensitive voter data, and therefore were not accessible to the author.¹⁷⁴

Table 11: Voter Turnout for House of Delegate Elections and Referendum 1980-2000



Source: Library of Virginia, State Board of Elections: Central Registration Roster System Reports.

While the consolidation referendum was the vote with the lowest turnout, it was out of synch with the typical election cycle, taking place in April instead of November like the rest. Despite three years of intense coverage, fewer citizens went to the polls to express their opinion on the fate of the local high schools. This brings an interesting paradox where more people could probably identify with the consolidation issue than with the delegates elections, but, partially due to a different voting date, the plethora of knowledge about the school consolidation issue did not translate into more votes. It's a shame there is no data regarding the 1982 special election. That race would have made a more adequate comparison than the other delegate races, because it was out of the routine order, like the referendum. While there are no records of the voter turnout percentage, the total number of Rockbridge County voters in the 1982 delegate race was 3,603,

¹⁷⁴ Library of Virginia, State Board of Elections: Central Registration Roster System Reports, Record Group 14: accession number 33133, boxes 14-16, 18.; *Ibid*, accession number 34427, boxes 4,5,9-11.; *Ibid*, accession number 35391, box 9.; *Ibid*, accession number 36414, boxes 21, 23.; *Ibid*, accession number 41730, boxes 3, 9.; *Ibid*, accession number 41727, boxes 1-2.

over 1000 votes less than in the 1983 delegates race, which had 4858 voters.¹⁷⁵ This suggests that there may have been a smaller turnout percentage for the 1982 race than the election of 1983.

The voter turnout in the 1987 delegate race is surprising, given the relative lack of coverage, letters written, and events held leading up to the vote. Rockbridge County was split into two delegate districts, the 24th and the 19th. Republican Vance Wilkins, from Amherst County, ran unopposed in the 24th, while in the 19th Independent incumbent Lacey Putney won against Buena Vista City native, Ron Gravatt.¹⁷⁶ A similar situation occurred in the 1991 campaign. *The News Gazette* provided relatively little coverage, and there were fewer public events leading up to the election, but there was significant engagement regarding letters written to the editor. The race was more contentious in general: redistricting after the 1990 census resulted in a third delegate district within the county and all three incumbents faced challengers.¹⁷⁷ Thus a higher turnout for this election isn't surprising, but it is interesting to see how little *The News Gazette* covered that election compared to others with less competition. The interest in these elections, coupled with a comparable level of voter participation, at best, in elections with greater coverage bring into question the relation between *The News Gazette's* coverage of material and voter participation.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, accession number 33133, boxes 15-16.; "1982 House of Delegates General Election: District 24," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/48045/>.; "1982 House of Delegates General Election: District 19," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/48040/>.

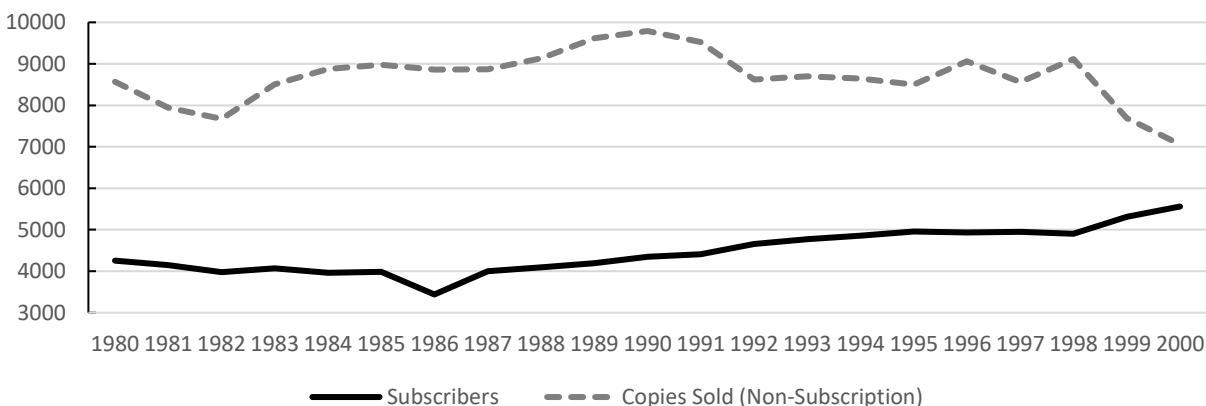
¹⁷⁶ "1987 House of Delegates General Election: District 24," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/47629/>.; "1987 House of Delegates General Election: District 19," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/47624/>.

¹⁷⁷ "1991 House of Delegates General Election: District 19," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/47351/>.; "1991 House of Delegates General Election: District 24," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/47356/>.; "1991 House of Delegates General Election: District 18," *Virginia Department of Elections: Elections Database*, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historical.elections.virginia.gov/elections/view/47350/>.

The News Gazette's Community Connections

The sales and subscriptions of *The News Gazette* can help identify the reach and influence of the paper throughout Rockbridge county. If there are a large number of readers, then it boosts the paper's credibility and confirms the relationship between *The News Gazette's* readership and community involvement. Table 12 shows that from 1980-2000, newspaper subscriptions were steadily increasing, except for a sharp decline in 1985, and a rapid spike in subscriptions starting in 1998. Individual sales, after facing a decline through 1988, steadily increased until 1990, and then steadily declined with exceptions in 1996 and 1998.¹⁷⁸

Table 12: Number of Subscribers and Individual Purchases of the News Gazette 1980-2000



Source: Matt Paxton, publisher of *The News Gazette*, email message to the Author, March 23, 2018.

Increases in both subscriptions and sales were present during the coverage of consolidation, with sales reaching their peak the year after the referendum. Additionally, there were increases of sales following the 1982, 1983, and 1997 delegate elections. Conversely there were declines in sales after the 1981, 1991, and 1999 races. The period where the paper gave coverage regarding consolidation, from 1986 to 1989, was a period of growth in both subscribers

¹⁷⁸ Matt Paxton, publisher of *The News Gazette*, email message to the Author, March 23, 2018.

and individual sales of papers. There was a sharp increase in 1986, but afterwards it leveled off. This suggests that the consolidation issue generated interest in the paper, particularly during early coverage, which may indicate growth in community involvement. However, with a trend of growth in sales lasting throughout the 80s, and the overall trend of growth in subscriptions throughout the two decades of study, 1986 seems to be the only outlier year within consolidation's timeline. The rest are relatively consistent with the trends of the study.

The number of residents in Rockbridge county has increased from 17,991 in 1980, to 20,808 in 2000, while the number of subscriptions to *The News Gazette* averaged from 4253 to 5,560.¹⁷⁹ In 1980, the total number of subscriptions plus individual sales was equivalent to 71.2% of the county population, and that percentage fell to 60.6% by 2000. The cities of Lexington and Buena Vista are also within *The News Gazette's* area of coverage, but there is no data regarding the proportion of subscribers from these cities. However, Rockbridge county has a larger population than these cities combined, with Buena Vista and Lexington experiencing long-term population declines after 1980, falling from 6,717 and 7,292 people respectively.¹⁸⁰ Thus, the subscriptions alone reach a large number of county citizens. This suggests there is a strong connection between county residents and *The News Gazette*, validating this paper as a respected source of information for Rockbridge county's citizens. Therefore, the increases in sales and subscriptions during high profile elections and issues signify a public interest in these events through the lens of *The News Gazette*. However, there is little evidence that shows this interest in print media coverage translates to civic engagement or political participation.

¹⁷⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Unit Counts, PHC-3-48, October 2003: 2. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/phc-3-48.pdf>; Matt Paxton, publisher of *The News Gazette*, email message to the Author, March 23, 2018.

¹⁸⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Unit Counts, PHC-3-48, October 2003: 3.

Analysis

Determining the relation between local print media coverage and both civic engagement and political participation hinges on whether increased media coverage correlates with increased civic and political action. The school consolidation issue garnered a significantly greater rate of coverage than any House of Delegate election between 1980 and 2000, yet the data shows that that Rockbridge County citizens responded at a lower rate to consolidation than competitive House of Delegates races. There were some displays of civic engagement, such as the creation of and subsequent protest by the Taxpayers Against Consolidation group, and public interest in informative sessions by county officials, but, overall community engagement paled in comparison to routine elections.¹⁸¹ Additionally, the voter turnout rate for the consolidation referendum was significantly lower than every House of Delegates election recorded. While part of that is due to the referendum taking place on an atypical day, in April 1989, *The News Gazette*, due to its broad community reach, effectively informed citizens of the upcoming vote.

Some elections exhibited a contrasting pattern. The 1981 House of Delegates election, although controversial with county residents dissatisfied with their new placement into two different state legislative districts, faced less coverage than most elections between 1980 and 2000, yet had one of the highest voter turnout rates within the same time period. This suggests that the contextual circumstances of an election may play a greater role in political participation than local print media coverage. The 1989 election is similar, with relatively low coverage, but above average engagement and about average voter turnout. The rate of coverage did not seem to correlate with how engaged Rockbridge County was with the corresponding election.

¹⁸¹ Darryl Woodson, "Group Organizes to Oppose Consolidation," *The News Gazette*. Feb. 11, 1987.; "Public Hearings on Consolidation Canceled," *The News Gazette*. Jan. 28, 1987.

Since interest in *The News Gazette* was increasing in both subscriptions and sales during consolidation coverage, it is reasonable to believe the paper's coverage of the issue caught the interest of the public in the areas it serves. *The News Gazette* did an effective job of informing citizens and generating interest in elections critical to local residents, particularly in years with contested elections. The 1997 race maybe could have benefited from more coverage, since it had contested elections with additional third-party candidates, but for the most part community engagement was above average, with exception to letters written to the editor. In the case of the 1999 election, little more could be done to inspire greater turnout and participation with the election, especially with the candidates hosting multiple forums, and the high stakes of redistricting and potential Republican control of the legislature for the first time since Reconstruction. In essence, *The News Gazette* effectively reached the community it serves, empowering citizens to be involved with the community and to take public action.

Conclusion

The data shows that substantial coverage by *The News Gazette* on a political issue or election does not correlate with civic engagement nor political participation. The consolidation question received significantly greater coverage than any House of Delegates election, yet the rate of engagement and voter participation were significantly lower in comparison. High profile and competitive elections did generate interest, engagement, and participation among county residents, but this was regardless of the coverage *The News Gazette* provided. While the paper did effectively reach and inform community members, it was not a primary source of inspiration for civic or political action.

This challenges the assumptions Hayes and Lawless made in, “The Decline of Local News and its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data”. While they observed a decline in coverage correlating with a decline in civic engagement and voter participation, the data surrounding *The News Gazette* suggests that factors surrounding an election might have more influence than the rate of local coverage itself. While *The News Gazette* is well connected to the community it provides coverage for, it is still a challenge for the paper to encourage greater participation and engagement, when factors surrounding an election may not be conducive to generating interest.

Subsequent research could examine the differences between local print media’s relation with their communities in urban and rural settings, which may be a challenge, since urban communities are more likely to have competing media markets. What makes Rockbridge county easier to study is that there are few competing media outlets. Additionally, studying the relation between media coverage and community involvement with policy-based votes, such as referendums, state constitutional amendments, and ballot propositions, may prove beneficial, as these topics are more likely to be policy oriented than elections between candidates.

Thesis Conclusion

Rockbridge County, Virginia's consolidation of its high schools reveals the sweeping impact of local government policy. It is an example of how consolidation can negatively affect communities that lose their schools. Natural Bridge Station and Fairfield faced decline or stunted growth in relation to nearby communities that were not directly affected. Local media coverage of consolidation did not result in increased civic engagement. It did correlate with increased paper subscriptions, but voter turnout for the referendum was lower than in House of Delegates elections for the county between 1980 and 2000. This plus a comparable rate of letters to the editor and related community events between the consolidation issue and delegates elections show no real impact from increased coverage. Even so, the influence outsiders have in the policy process at the local level is greater than at the federal and state level. *The News-Gazette* had a more influential role in shaping consolidation policy because of its ability to report on developments in the policy process. The school board held several public hearings where local stakeholders were able to directly express their concerns to the governing officials in person. Interest groups take a role in shaping policy because they are more reactive than proactive at the local level. This suggests a role of influencing policy instead of trying to set an agenda. Because there is more influence from policy outsiders, decision-making is more responsive to public opinion at the local level than at the federal level.

There are several areas that could use further study or consideration. One of the limitations of a case study is that it only highlights this issue of consolidation rather than local government action as a whole. More research into the tendency of local government policy to fundamentally affect the lives of its citizens compared to the federal government would be helpful. The federal and state governments can enact policy that brings sweeping and

fundamental changes, such as healthcare reform or the effects of *Brown v. Board of Education*, but local government, because it directly presides over small communities, routinely affects citizens' lifestyles through policy. Finally, further study on the dynamic between federal, state, and local government can help clarify the impact of each governing power. Bolick's *Grassroots Tyranny* asserts that the decline of federalism has not only centralized our federal government, but has also brought a form of tyranny at the local level. Understanding the changes in local government behavior from before the New Deal and the Great Society's centralization to today can determine the changing impact local government has upon its communities.

Alexis DeTocqueville stated that democratic societies tend towards centralization.¹⁸² Continued emphasis of federal policies over significant local issues only contributes towards further centralization. A focus on the federal means ignorance of the local, which is often trivialized as managing garbage pickup, zoning, and building codes. Minimizing the importance of local government policy thus erodes our federal system of government. As people focus and rely on the national government to take care of healthcare, education, transportation, housing, and the wellbeing of citizens, they fail to see the role of the local government. The erosion of federalism in government administration reinforces a progressive federal government run by moral will rather than the rule of law and natural right. All political importance will have been divested from the local level in favor of the national government. Asserting America's principles of freedom, limited government, and natural rights will conversely promote the importance of the local sphere.

¹⁸² Alexis DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by Eduardo Nolla, trans. by James T Schleifer, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010): 1200. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-democracy-in-america-historical-critical-edition-vol-4>.

The founding fathers spoke extensively about how to preserve federalism. Washington acknowledged the importance of morality and virtue, calling religion and virtue “indispensable supports” for republican government.¹⁸³ Additionally, a well-informed citizenry is key. In his State of the Union address in 1790, Washington called knowledge “the surest basis of public happiness...To the security of a free constitution it contributes in various ways...by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights.”¹⁸⁴ The importance of a well-informed electorate has not been forgotten. President Coolidge noted

“The great truth cannot be too often repeated that this nation is exactly what the people make it....What is always of the utmost importance, if we have the privilege to vote we must inform ourselves of the questions at issue and going to the ballot box on election day there vote, as we claim the sacred right of Americans to live, according to the dictates of our own conscience.”¹⁸⁵

The simplest way to assert local government’s importance is to bring more attention to local government. An increased focus on local policy from media sources, political parties, and analysts can help restore local government investment. This may not result in increased civic engagement—as this case study revealed—but greater knowledge of the local issues could help people realize how much their city council or board of supervisors may affect their lives and how “politics is local”. Secondly, the primary means of informing our citizens of our government and its political institutions is in the k-12 classroom. Government classes primarily focus on the functions and means of the federal government. Devoting more time and placing more emphasis on the importance of local government and of freedom will contribute to asserting the local

¹⁸³ George Washington, “Farewell Address,” September 19, 1796.
<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/farewell-address/>.

¹⁸⁴ George Washington, “State of the Union Address,” January 8, 1790.
<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/first-annual-message-to-congress/>.

¹⁸⁵ Calvin Coolidge, “Patriotism in Time of Peace,” October 4, 1924.
<https://coolidgefoundation.org/resources/speeches-as-president-1923-1929-14/>.

level's role in a federalized system of government. In his farewell address, Reagan described the importance of teaching our children to value freedom:

“This national feeling is good, but it won't count for much, and it won't last unless it's grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge.

An informed patriotism is what we want. And are we doing a good enough job teaching our children what America is and what she represents in the long history of the world? Those of us who are over 35 or so years of age grew up in a different America. We were taught, very directly, what it means to be an American. And we absorbed, almost in the air, a love of country and an appreciation of its institutions....But now, we're about to enter the '90s, and some things have changed. Younger parents aren't sure that an unambivalent appreciation of America is the right thing to teach modern children. And as for those who create the popular culture, well-grounded patriotism is no longer the style. Our spirit is back, but we haven't reinstitutionalized it. We've got to do a better job of getting across that America is freedom—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of enterprise. And freedom is special and rare. It's fragile; it needs protection [protection].”¹⁸⁶

Informing citizens to participate in a republican form of government means sharing the significance and meaning behind our form of government, not just its means of operation.

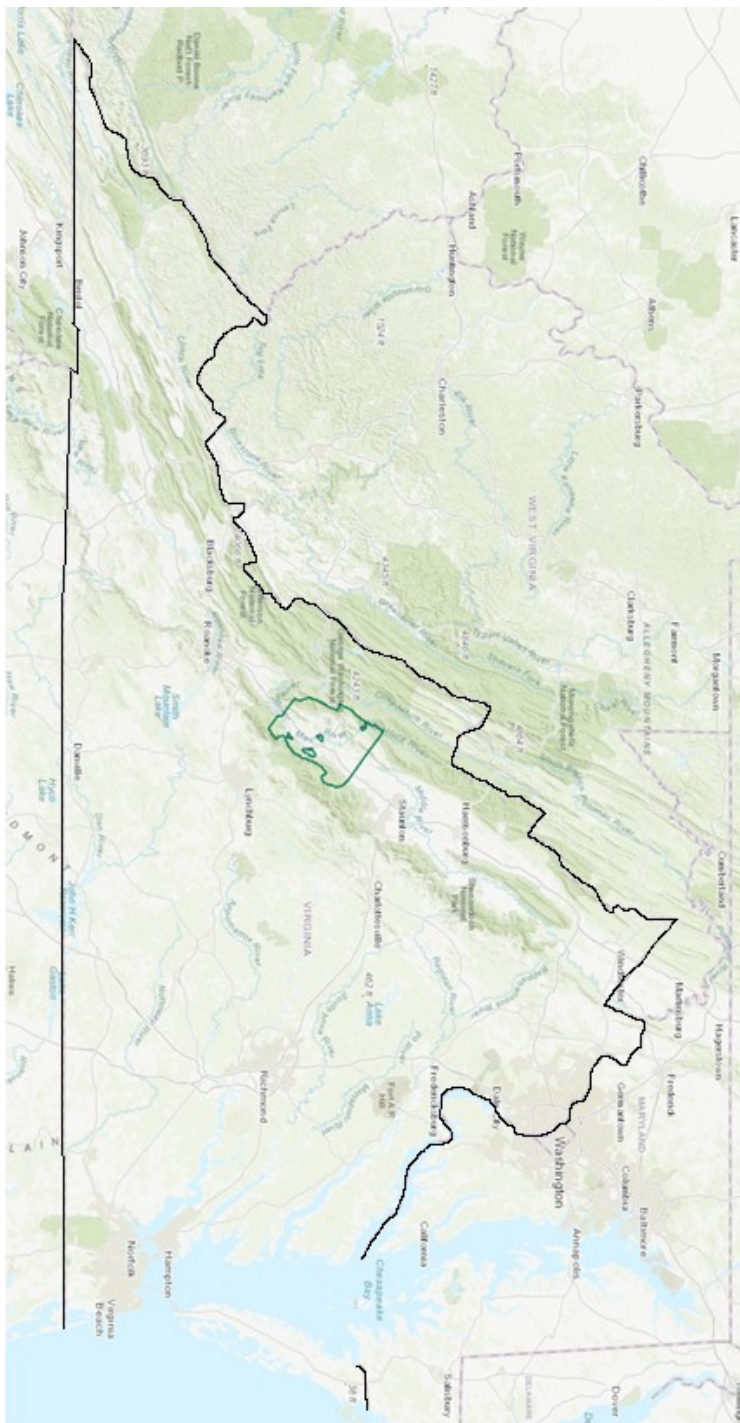
Bolick's *Grassroots Tyranny* underscored the importance of freedom. Federalism's collapse began when government ignored freedom for security.

With the vitriolic nature of national politics, it is easy to overlook the importance of local government. However, it is vital to the everyday lives of American citizens. Local government policy is more likely to bring fundamental changes to small communities, yet such policy is also the most responsive to public action. Overlooking local government contributes to our path of centralization originally catalyzed by the progressive movement, the New Deal, and the Great

¹⁸⁶ Ronald Reagan, “January 11, 1989: Farewell Address,” January 11, 1989. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-11-1989-farewell-address>.

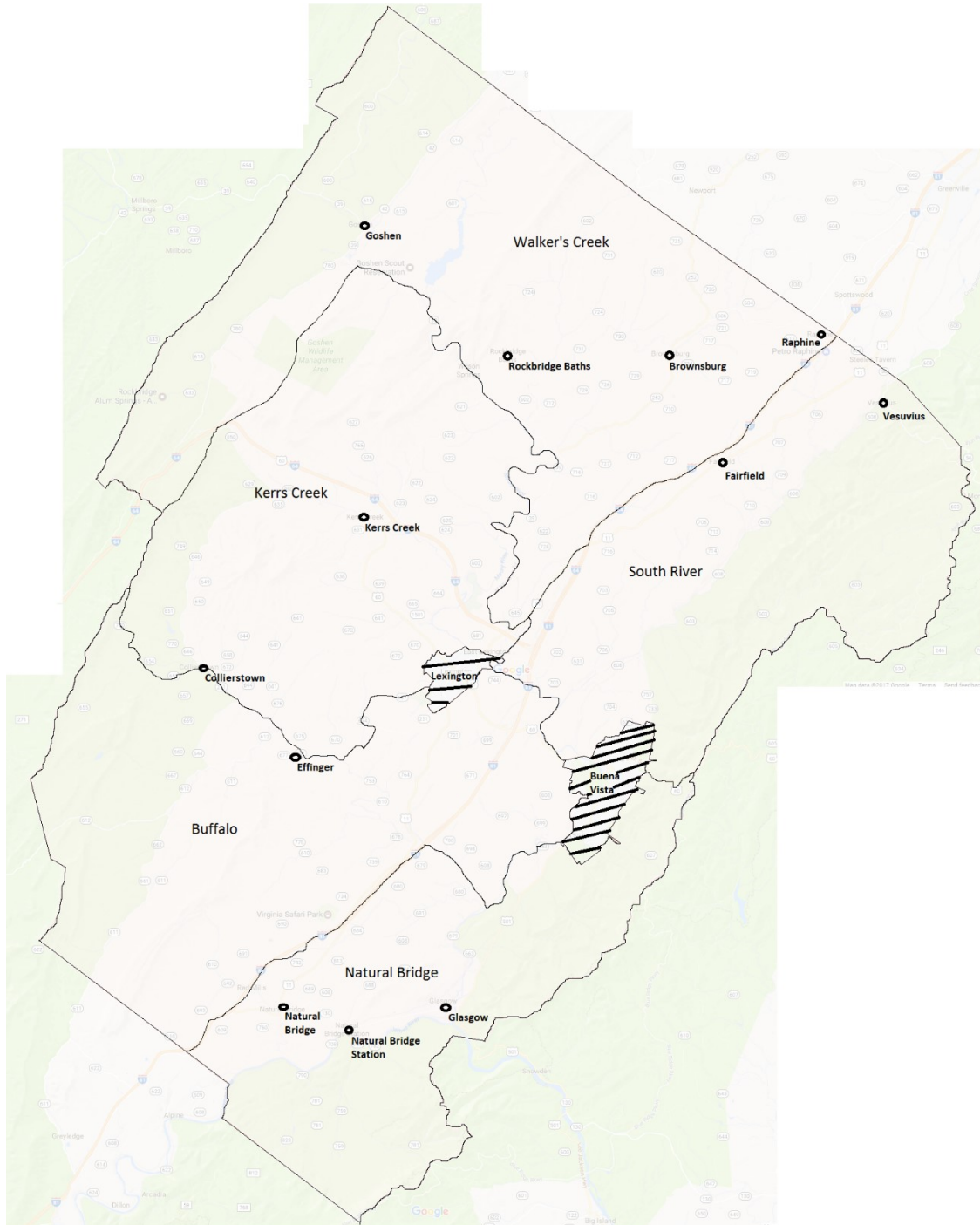
Society. Restoring the principle of federalism starts by asserting the importance of freedom and recognizing the role local government fills through our means of informing citizens, such as consumable media and in K-12 civics instruction.

Appendix A: Virginia and Rockbridge County (2018)



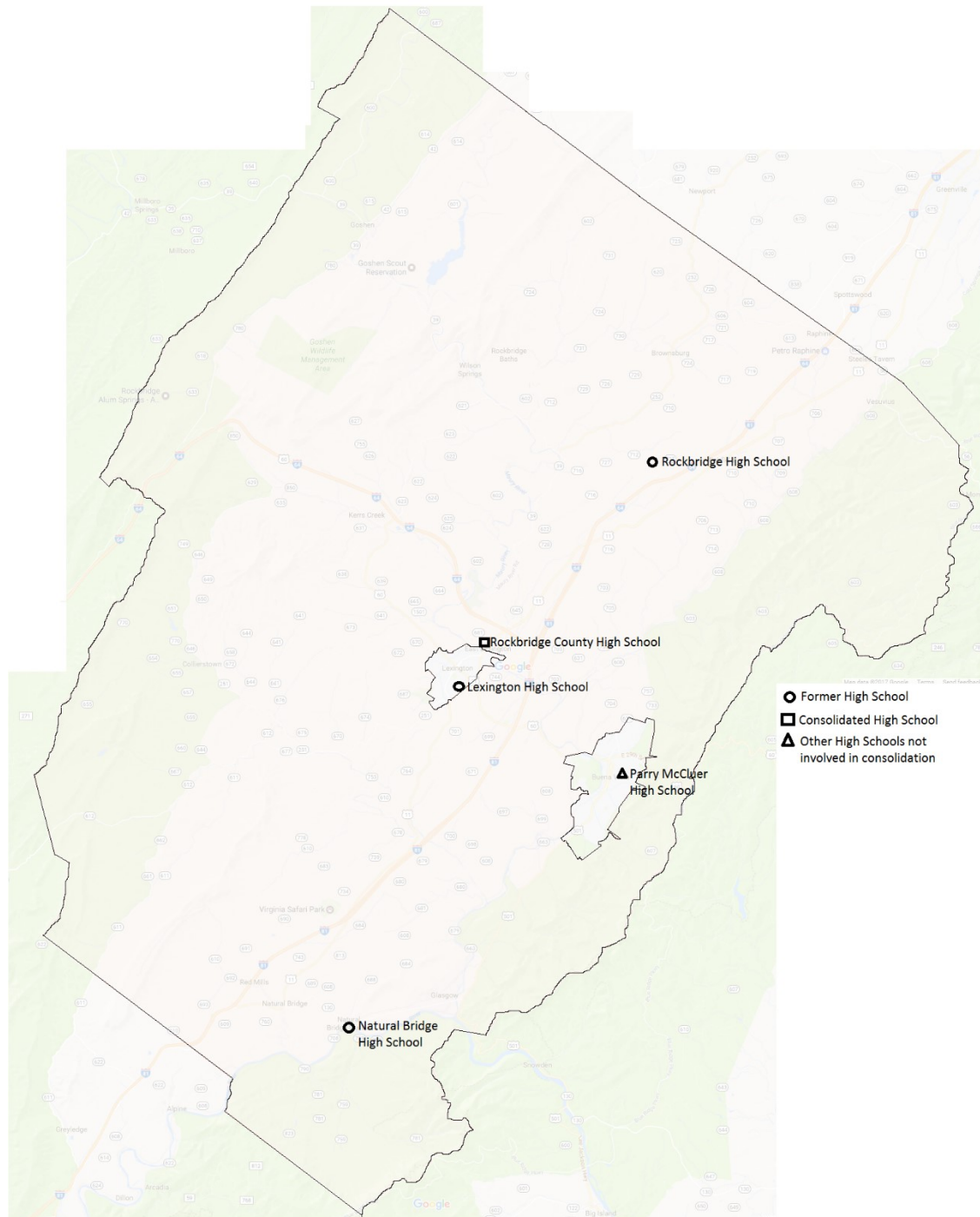
This is a map of the Commonwealth of Virginia with Rockbridge County outlined in green. Emphasis added to Virginia's borders. Map from: Rockbridge County Geographic Information System.
<https://www.webgis.net/va/Rockbridge/>.

Appendix B: Magisterial Districts and Place Names of Rockbridge County (2013)



Above are the five Magisterial Districts of Rockbridge County, along with the names of cities, incorporated and unincorporated towns, and localities within Rockbridge County, Virginia. The cities of Lexington and Buena Vista are not under county jurisdiction, and therefore are not a part of any districts. Map derived from: Robert Cook, “Rockbridge County Localities and Public Schools: How the 1992 Consolidation of the High Schools Affected Education and Communities” (undergraduate thesis, Eastern Mennonite University, 2017).

Appendix C: Map of Former and Current High Schools Within Rockbridge County, The City of Lexington and Buena Vista (1992)



Map of the locations of the former high schools and Rockbridge County High School. The city of Buena Vista retained its own independent high school. Map from Robert Cook, “Rockbridge County Localities and Public Schools: How the 1992 Consolidation of the High Schools Affected Education and Communities” (undergraduate thesis, Eastern Mennonite University, 2017), 40.

**Appendix D:
Referendum Vote Totals by Precinct**

Precinct	Voter Turnout	Yes Votes	No Votes
Buffalo			
Airport	37.6%	171	84
Ben Salem	29.3%	73	76
Fancy Hill	39.8%	77	88
Effinger	59.9%	149	91
Kerrs Creek			
Highland Belle	35.6%	253	115
Natural Bridge			
Natural Bridge	43.1%	83	215
Glasgow	54.9%	74	176
South River			
Mountain View	28.1%	97	65
Fairfield	40.1%	70	112
Vesuvius	33%	36	66
Walker's Creek			
Goshen	28.1%	35	55
Meadowview	36.7%	138	65
Rockbridge Baths	46.2%	74	53
Rockbridge High	41.4%	68	107
Totals:	37.7%	1398	1368

Table from: Darryl Woodson, "Yes! School Bond Issue Narrowly Voted," *The News Gazette*, 5 Apr. 1989.
Magisterial districts were added to the chart.

**Appendix E:
1972 Referendum Vote Totals by District**

District	Yes Votes	No Votes
Buffalo	365	377
Kerrs Creek	436	179
Natural Bridge	153	422
South River	415	172
Walker's Creek	553	306
Totals:	1,925[sic]	1,452[sic]

Table created from: Woodson, Darryl. "Consolidation: What Went Wrong." *The News Gazette*. March 4, 1987. The numbers in the paper at the district level do not add up to the totals given. These were the results as printed in *The News Gazette*.

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