



How Citizen Attachment to Neighborhoods Helps to Improve Municipal Services and Public Spaces

Daniel T. O'Brien, Northeastern University

Dietmar Offenhuber, Northeastern University

Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, Fordham University

Melissa Sands, The London School of Economics and Political Science

Eric Gordon, Boston University

What motivates people to contact their local governments with reports about street light outages, potholes, graffiti, and other deteriorations in public spaces? Current efforts to improve government interactions with constituents operate on the premise that citizens who make such reports are motivated by broad civic values. In contrast, our recent research demonstrates that such citizens are primarily motivated by *territoriality* – that is, attachments to the spaces where they live. Our research focuses on Boston's "311 system," which provides telephone hotlines and web channels through which constituents can request non-emergency government services.

Although our study focuses on 311 users in Boston, it holds broader implications for more than 400 U.S. municipalities that administer similar systems. And our results encourage a closer look at the drivers of citizen participation in many "*coproduction* programs" – programs that involve people in the design and implementation of government services. Currently, 311 is just one example of government efforts to use technology to involve constituents in joint efforts.

Territorial Ties and Civic Engagement

The concept of territoriality originated in studies of animal behavior – such as bears marking trees in the forest or lions and hyenas fighting over a kill. Human beings also need to manage the ownership of objects and spaces, but social psychologists have demonstrated that human territoriality, whether at home, the workplace, or a neighborhood, entails more than the defense of objects or spaces against others. It includes maintenance and caretaking, and even extends to items shared with others.

Research on public administration tends to assume that citizens with a strong sense of civic motivation will get involved in programs to coproduce public goods in cooperation with officials. This interpretation invokes a dynamic called the "bridge to citizenship," arguing that citizens who vote, volunteer, or write letters to the editor, for example, are the ones most likely to participate in coproduction programs – by making calls to 311, for instance, to report some deterioration in local facilities. In our research, we also considered another hypothesis: that a strong sense of territoriality might motivate people to report issues in public spaces via 311. Citizens might make 311 calls, that is, because they care about the upkeep of their neighborhoods, not just because they are already politically engaged as individuals.

We measured territoriality and civic dispositions among 311 users through survey items. We asked respondents whether they engaged in behaviors like volunteering in the previous six months, and we used public records to see if they had voted in the most recent municipal election. Then we married data from the survey and the public voter records with tracking data generated by Boston's 311 system, which provides reporting activity for each individual.

Our results revealed that both territoriality and civic dispositions predicted patterns of 311 reporting, but in a manner that reflected the ways urbanites interact with the geography of Boston. People who expressed stronger territorial attachments made more reports over a greater geographical range within their home neighborhood, according to 311 records. Those with strong civic dispositions were more likely to indicate in the survey that they had reported issues in locations where they work, their commute, or when visiting friends and family outside their home neighborhoods. This dichotomy makes sense – because territoriality is more connected to people's homes, whereas civic dispositions focus more broadly on many city arenas. Still, our findings can be misleading about the relative importance of territorial and civic dispositions. That is because about four of every five 311 reports are made within 150 meters of the homes of those who make such calls. Local attachments play a magnified role in 311 participation.

Implications for 311 Systems and Other Coproduction Programs

Most strikingly, our research speaks to current discussions of 311 systems. Contrary to what some experts claim, these programs appear to elicit participation independent of strong civic orientations. Our findings should encourage administrators of 311 systems to engage in constituent outreach efforts that highlight territorial attachments, not just people's general proclivities to be good citizens. For example, as one of us has demonstrated in an experiment, effective promotional materials could highlight neighborhoods rather than entire cities: "Clean up Eagle Hill!" vs. "Clean up Boston!". Currently, 311 mobile applications are branded and publicized almost solely according to their home city, but officials might do better to emphasize neighborhood-based themes in these apps.

A more territorial perspective could also be useful in addressing concerns that new civic technologies reinforce long-standing inequities across demographic groups. A majority of less affluent neighborhoods, for instance, use 311 services less intensively than more affluent ones, but that might change if the services stressed local identities. Outreach by public officials to under-engaged neighborhoods could perhaps become more effective if coupled with efforts to stress targeted residents' sense of connections with and investment in their neighborhoods.

Systems of 311 reporting are but one example of how coproduction might engage motivations other than civic dispositions. The basic principle is to recognize that humans are endowed with a diverse array of motivations, and find the right ones for the purposes at hand. Whereas 311 and other neighborhood-based programs like community policing should involve appeals to people's territorial attachments, other programs should look for motivations relevant to the specific form of participation they require. This is particularly important in the current moment, given increasing governmental efforts to reach citizens with internet portals, smartphone apps, and other innovative civic technologies. Rather than serving as undifferentiated "bridges to citizenship," each program and technology should be seen as a lever to translate a variety of citizen concerns into positive public outcomes. As governments try to expand citizen involvement, they must pay careful attention to the various motivations citizens bring to public life.

Read more in Daniel O'Brien, Dietmar Offenhuber, Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, Melissa Sands, and Eric Gordon, "**Uncharted Territoriality in Coproduction: The Motivations for 311 Reporting.**" *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (online first, August 2016).