

Claudia N. Avellaneda: What Works in Latin American Municipalities? Assessing Local Government Performance

*Ivan Koprić**

UDK: 35.071.55:352/353(7/8)(048)
3.071.55:352/353(7/8)(048)

Claudia N. Avellaneda's book about local government performance published in 2023 by Edward Elgar Publishing gives a worthy insight into the complex issue of local government performance in five Latin American countries – Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico, with a comparative chapter on Latin America property value reappraisals. Indexes of the main concepts, key words, and authors give a good overview of the book scope and make scrolling through the text easier.

The book consists of six empirical studies dealing with six different performance dimensions – output quality, responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency, participative decision-making, and fiscal inputs in six policy areas – education (Colombia), fiscal policy (Brazil), public finances (Ecuador), infrastructure grants (Chile), urban planning (Colombia), and decision-making in development programs (Mexico).

C. N. Avellaneda from the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs of Indiana University, USA, co-authored five chapters, and authored a chapter on Colombia as well as the introduction and conclusion to the

* Ivan Koprić, Full Professor and dean of the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, and president of the Institute of Public Administration, Zagreb, Croatia (redovni profesor Pravnog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu te predsjednik Instituta za javnu upravu, e-mail: ikopric@pravo.hr).

book. Other chapter co-authors are Johabed Olvera from the School of Public Policy of Penn State University, USA; Marco Antonio Catussi Paschoalotto from São Paulo School of Business and Administration; Getulio Vargas Foundation, Brazil, Gabriel Piòda from Chield Trends, USA; and Julio C. Zambrano, from the TUM School of Social Science and Technology of the Technical University of Munich, Germany.

C. N. Avellaneda and M. A. C. Paschoalotto assess the influence of mayor's human capital and political context on fiscal inputs in the Brazilian local government system, i.e. in the state of São Paulo. It is interesting that empirical data do not support the initial thesis, i.e. "results suggest neither mayoral human capital nor political support correlates with property tax collection" (p. 8), deviating from the prior empirical studies in Brazil, Colombia, and elsewhere, some of them performed by C. N. Avellaneda and her colleagues. The co-authors conclude that São Paulo's wealth may be the cause of null results of their study, proposing widening the empirical investigation to poorer Brazilian states such as Piauí, Maranhão, and Alagoas.

The relation between administrative capacity and local governmental effectiveness is a theme of the Chilean chapter, co-authored by G. Piòda and C. N. Avellaneda. Administrative capacity is measured in terms of capability to deploy resources, expertise acquired to perform a particular task, and possession of human resources to perform a task. Its effect on municipal effectiveness in securing infrastructure grants is tested, based on an inspection in 54,000 infrastructural grant proposals submitted by 340 Chilean municipalities during nine-year period (2005 – 2013). Results provide grounds for conclusion that "municipal effectiveness in securing grants is positively influenced by both administrative capacity and political factors" (p. 8), counting party alignment and contextual municipal facts among the latter (p. 75).

C. N. Avellaneda has researched how the political (mayor), managerial (principal), and bureaucratic (teacher) quality influence school and pupils' performance in the Colombian setting. The study propositions are tested using data from 88 public schools in 39 municipalities of one of the Colombian states. Results show that "teachers' quality, in terms of professional ranking, managerial/principal quality, and school size positively influence school performance", while the "percentage of rural population in a municipality in which a school operates negatively affects" it. School remoteness from the state capital positively influence school performance (p. 101).

Research on the way how mayor's gender and task-specific education influence the Ecuadorian municipal financial efficiency is presented in the next chapter, co-authored by J. C. Zambrano and C. N. Avellaneda. They have proposed that task-specific education directly and indirectly (through gender) influences municipal financial efficiency. The results, tested on a data set from all 221 Ecuadorian municipalities, have shown that specific public administration education contributes to financial self-sufficiency, and this effect is even stronger in municipalities led by female mayors (by almost 40%), while gender alone does not have a direct effect on municipal financial sustainability. Such results strongly support the need for training in public administration for subnational leaders.

C. N. Avellaneda and J. Olvera present the results of testing the effects of Mexican mayors' political ambitions and qualifications, which are conceptualized as a combination of education and public sector experience, on their decisions to delegate decision-making in collaborative arrangements. In a quasi-experiment, 50 municipal mayors were confronted with the hypothetical case of decision-making delegation, in order to find out to which extent local political leaders would be willing to delegate the selection of beneficiaries of municipal support to small businesses. The findings show that "mayors with re-election ambitions are less likely to delegate than mayors whose political ambition target higher levels of government" and that "more qualified mayors ... are less inclined to delegate the selection of beneficiaries" (pp. 142 – 143).

The main research question in the chapter focused on the property value reappraisals in Colombia, co-authored by C. N. Avellaneda and G. Piña, is whether the political, contextual, and/or managerial factors influence the reappraisal of municipal property value. The findings confirm the co-authors' propositions: a) "political factors, such as the electoral cycle and a mayor's city council ideological alignment", b) "royalties from natural resources seem to discourage", "urbanization appears to promote cadaster updates", and small municipalities (under 20,000 inhabitants) do not possess "the necessary cartographic tools", and c) mayoral qualification in terms of education level, as well as mayoral sector experience (the latter only in small municipalities) positively contribute to municipal update reappraisals of property values (p. 8).

Both introductory and final chapters are written by the book editor, Professor C. N. Avellaneda. A summary of evidence about different policy areas and dimensions of municipal performance from Latin American countries are presented, reviewed and evaluated in the closing chapter.

Avellaneda correctly accentuates methodological limitations by stating that “(T)he ideal would have been to assess the same performance dimension within the same policy areas along the same period across the six countries” (p. 203), which is hardly possible.

The book is theoretically and practically relevant. First of all, it offers empirically grounded insights into several municipal performance dimensions in six policy sectors in five democratically non-consolidated, or not-fully-democratically-consolidated countries of Latin America. Secondly, the ties and directions of influence and impact among policy areas and municipal performance dimensions are theoretically well elaborated.

Thirdly, empirical data have been collected in the appropriate manner, scope and volume. Just for illustration, the data set in Brazil have been derived from all 645 municipalities in the state of São Paulo in the 2009 – 2016 period, 340 out of 346 Chilean municipalities, the whole population of Ecuadorian municipalities (221), and 916 (out of 1,103) Colombian municipalities researched in an eight-year period (2007 – 2014), while only the study on participative decision-making in Mexico has been tested in a quasi-experimental manner in a small-scale survey of 50 (out of 2,454) Mexican mayors.

Fourthly, the editor and main contributor, Professor Avellaneda, constructed a firm frame of chapters based on her deep understanding and insights in Latin American local government settings, command of public sector performance and public policy theories, and theoretical knowledge about the wider context of contemporary public management and governance themes and reforms. Her summary of findings in the closing chapter gives an additional value to the whole book.

Fifthly, many insights can be tested in different contexts, and the book results, conclusions and proposals are practically applicable, *ceteris paribus*, in numerous countries in almost all continents, Europe and Croatia included, especially in decentralizing countries. It would be interesting, for example, to perform similar empirical studies in European multi-level context, to see if and to which extent the European level influences municipal and regional performance, as well as the public performance at the national level.

Municipal and public sector performance, as well as performance assessment, measurement and advancement at the state and subnational levels, are the fields that need robust and committed involvement of numerous scholars and professionals. The reviewed book is of particular importance for actors and people attached to politics, public management and admin-

istration, various public sector professions, and academia. Its depths and detail, theoretical foundations, richness of empirical data, findings and results, and their thorough and systematic interpretation are the qualities that need to be highly respected.

In conclusion, I warmly recommend Claudia N. Avellaneda's recent book *What Works in Latin American Municipalities? Assessing Local Government Performance* to the community of scholars, experts, and students interested in theorizing and analysing public governance in non-consolidated democracies, as well as to those particularly interested in municipal and public performance. Moreover, public managers, professionals, and politicians at all governmental levels will also profit from the book.