

Avellaneda, C. N. (2023). *What works in Latin American municipalities? Assessing local government performance*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

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Latin American city halls have been gaining prominence as agents of change for the last four decades. The region's democratization processes unleashed a variety of political, fiscal, and administrative reforms that, among other changes, redefined the municipal sphere. Empowered by the popular vote, new public policy attributions, and tax collection capabilities, mayors and their cities are gradually acquiring centrality in national politics. Yet, more than that, city governments have also seen increased responsibility as providers of public services. After all, city halls are the closest level of government that citizens interact with. But how are Latin American local governments performing? Can we evaluate the quality of governance in the region's municipalities?

The questions above summarize the central inquiry of Claudia Avellaneda in *What Works in Latin American Municipalities? Assessing Local Government Performance*. A faculty member in the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University (USA), Avellaneda, working in collaboration with Latin American scholars, brings a volume divided into six chapters with empirical studies in hundreds of municipalities in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico. In a laudable scholarly effort, the authors present the results of their research to measure the quality of local governance focusing on several policy areas: municipal finances (Brazil), infrastructure grants (Chile), financial self-sufficiency (Ecuador), participatory decision-making at local level (Mexico) and two separate studies on Colombia's municipal governance: public education and urban growth. Departing from a common trend in urban Latin-American literature of focusing on a city government or a couple of case studies, Avellaneda and her colleagues take the challenge to survey 645 municipalities in Brazil, 340 in Chile, 221 in Ecuador, 50 in Mexico, and 39 Colombian municipalities in a study focusing on public education and 916 cities examined in the urban growth and property values chapter.

Relying on statistical work, qualitative research, and fieldwork, the authors expose their research methods so readers can quickly identify the cause-effect relationships in their research hypotheses. Considering the difficulties of measuring governance performance, the authors faced some monumental tasks, including data collection. As Avellaneda stresses, in some places,

"performance information never becomes directly available to the public" (p. 202). Yet, data unavailability and other research obstacles did not prevent the scholars from engaging in a worthwhile research endeavor. The results illuminate the dynamics of the governance process in Latin American cities.

In the Brazilian case, Avellaneda and Marco Antonio Catussi Pascholatto focus on the effectiveness of property tax collections in the São Paulo state's municipalities. With data from 2009 to 2016, they have tested the influence of mayors' political support at the city council and their party alignment with the governor and president on their ability to collect taxes effectively. Their research did not find a clear relationship between a mayor's political support and property tax collection.

In Chile, Avellaneda and Gabriel Piña studied local governments' effectiveness in securing infrastructural grants. Working with data collected in nine years (2005-2013), the authors found a robust relationship between securing grants and local governments' administrative capacity (expertise and human resources).

The study of Ecuadorian municipalities provided interesting and nuanced results about the relationship between gender and municipal finances. Avellaneda and Julio C. Zambrano explore whether women's participation in politics (city governments) impacts the ratio of local expenditures and revenues. With data collected between 2005 and 2013, the authors concluded that municipalities led by women mayors "are not statistically different in terms of financial self-sufficiency," adding that "municipalities led by mayors with a background education in public administration exhibit more financial self-sufficiency than mayors without that educational background" (p. 9). Yet, this is not the end of the story: financial self-sufficiency increases in cities where female mayors have degrees in public administration.

In Mexico, Avellaneda and Johabed Olvera explore one of the arguably most debated Latin America's municipal public policies as democratization gained strength: participatory decision-making, which Brazil has experimented with in hundreds of cities since the late 1980s. Yet, in this volume, the Mexican study does not seek to assess the success of popular participation in public policy decision-making. Here, the authors' objective is to measure the willingness of mayors to delegate policy decisions to non-profit and private organizations connected with the government in a cooperative program. The findings reveal that mayors with political ambitions for higher government positions are more likely to delegate than mayors seeking reelection.

Avellaneda collaborated with Gabriel Piña to study urban changes in Colombian cities. Examining data between 2007 and 2014, the authors claim that political factors "such as the electoral cycle and a mayor's city council ideological alignment influence the likelihood of a municipality updating its property value" (p.10). Further, the research reveals the impact of urbanization on property reappraisal. According to the authors, Colombian municipalities use rapid urban growth to increase their taxable capacity by updating property values.

In the other chapter on Colombian cities, Avellaneda focuses on public school performance based on education outcome quality. By examining data from 88 public schools in 39 municipalities, the author's findings show that school size, teachers', and principals' quality "positively influence school performance" (p. 9).

Graduate students in public administration courses and non-profit organizations focusing on Latin American urban development will benefit from the book's careful examination of municipal governance based on fieldwork and data collection in numerous Latin American cities. The study is equally valuable for elected and non-elected public officials – involved in local governance. Avellaneda and her contributor authors provide a radiography of the dynamics and management of municipal bureaucracies and various determinants of public policies in city's finances, education, municipal participatory processes, taxation, and infrastructure funding. As Latin America deals with several challenges, such as violence, stagnant economies, and socioeconomic inequalities, Avellaneda's book also has merit for demonstrating that – albeit slowly – the region's municipal sphere is being redefined for the better, in large part because of the accountability provided by democratic institutions.