The effect of local political culture on policing behaviors in the 1990s: A retest of Wilson’s theory in more contemporary times

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Abstract

In research on policing, James Q. Wilson was among the first scholars to suggest that local political culture constitutes a significant factor in explaining variation among law enforcement agency practices. Almost forty years after the publication of Varieties of Police Behavior, a classic study of police organizational behavior, Wilson’s monograph remains the basis of a widely held theory used to explain variation in police agency behaviors. More specifically, Wilson (1968) identified three distinctive styles of policing: the legalistic, the watchman, and the service styles. In his empirical work with these styles of policing, Wilson argued that local political culture was the major determinant of variation in policing styles. The purpose of this study was to retest the validity of Wilson’s argument in today’s policing environment. Using panel data collected among police agencies across the U.S. surveyed in 1993, 1996, and 2000, the authors found that there was little evidence to support the application of Wilson’s theory to the practices of contemporary police organizations.

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Introduction

Decentralization is a defining feature of American democracy (e.g., Gabriel, 1956) and the principle of federalism is intended to serve as an institutional guarantee of decentralization in American political life (Conlan, 1998, pp. 309–316). A good example of this decentralization is found in the great variety of local government policies and special districts serving local government residents across the country (Lorch, 2001, pp. 227–266). Political scientists had long argued that distinctive political cultures were present at the local level. For example, Elazar (1975, pp. 13–16) identified three principal historical sources of local political culture; in his own words he noted, “Three aspects of political culture stand out as particularly influential in shaping the operation of the American political system.” They are: (1) the set of citizen perceptions of what goals are properly pursued through politics, (2) the kinds of people who become active in government and politics based on their established traditions, and (3) the actual way in which the art of governance is practiced as reflected in the structure and operation of local government (Elazar, 1975; also see Elazar, 1970, 2002). In this study, the authors examined the effect of the third principal source of local political culture on the variation of local government agency practices identified by both Daniel Elazar and James Q. Wilson as critical to the conduct of local government business. Government structures are clearly known to have a strong impact on policy outcomes in the area of management styles (Williams & Adrian, 1963), equal employment opportunity efforts...
(Salzstein, 1986; Warner, Steel, & Lovrich, 1989), and crime rates (Stucky, 2003). James Q. Wilson applied that same line of reasoning to policing practices.

After almost forty years, it is fair to say that Wilson’s (1968) book, Varieties of Police Behavior (hereafter referred to as Varieties), continues to be one of the most influential scholarly works in American policing. Not surprisingly, a cursory review of the police literature showed that almost every textbook on American police featured a description of Wilson’s three styles of policing (e.g., Bartollas & Hahn, 1999; Carter & Radelet, 1999; Fyfe, Greene, Walsh, Wilson, & McLaren, 1997; Langworthy & Travis, 2003; Peak, 2003; Roberg, Crank, & Kuykendall, 2000; Walker & Katz, 2003). The social science citation index listed 620 citations of Wilson’s book in the period 1980 to 2004. Citation and page analyses indicated that Wilson’s scholarship was among the most prominent and widely cited in the police and criminal justice literature and his book, Varieties, had been ranked among the most often cited contributions to the literature in the field of criminal justice (Cohn, Farrington, & Wright, 1998; Wright & Miller, 1998).

In the 1970s and 1980s, several highly regarded scholars noted the importance of the book to serious research on the police. For example, in the late 1970s, Dorothy Guyot (1977) argued that Varieties was the lone exception to the general lack of credible empirical research on police organizations. Langworthy (1986, p. 32) suggested that Wilson’s theory of police behavior “remains the only empirically derived theory of police organization to date.” Similarly, Slovak (1986, p. 5) lamented that “there is a very real sense in which the promise offered by Wilson’s original analysis has gone unfulfilled.” In their recent review of research on policing, Maguire and Uchida (2000) found that the influence of Variety had remained very strong over the decades since original publication.

The purpose of this article is to reexamine Wilson’s theory about the relationship between local political culture (variation in local government structure) and priorities of policing (law enforcement, order maintenance, and provision of services). Different from all previous studies, this research was based upon panel survey data collected among law enforcement executives heading 281 U.S. municipal police departments surveyed in first 1993, in again 1996, and yet again in 2000. In addition, a tandem survey of municipal clerks was sent to each police agency’s city government in case of those three years. In the analysis to follow, the authors are going to use the same variables specified in Wilson’s book, Varieties, to measure local political culture throughout the empirical analysis reported here.

Literature review

The decentralization resulting from federalism in the American political system creates a multilevel of local government agencies in charge of a wide array of public services provided to local communities. For example, in the area of police services, agency practices differ widely across communities; some agencies focus heavily on traditional law enforcement goals exclusively, while others are engaged in efforts to address social disorder on a wide array of socioeconomic fronts. Over the three past decades, several perspectives have emerged as to why variations in public service delivery system have taken the different patterns present in U.S. cities. Elazar (1975), for example, suggested that the answer could be found in the history of settlement of local communities. He identified three distinctive strains of American political culture, namely: (1) individualistic, (2) moralistic, and (3) traditionalistic. Each strain of political culture has its own perspective regarding the role of government, the function of bureaucracy, and patterns of belief among local residents about the proper goals of political activity. Localities differ in the mix of political culture strains present and those different mixes are associated with different types of local politics and local government services (see Elazar, 1998).

Other political scientists had demonstrated that the elements of local government structure such as the gender and ethnicity of the chief administrator, the composition of the municipal council, and the method of election of public officials were predictors of variation in services among municipalities (e.g., Williams & Adrian, 1963). Lineberry and Fowler (1967) for example, identified the local government structure from the least reformed (mayor-council, partisan election with all council members elected from districts) to most reformed government (council-manager, nonpartisan with all council members elected at-large). Further, they found that the allocation of financial resources differed significantly between the least reformed versus the most reformed government. Recently, Stucky (2003) reported that crime patterns varied systematically by local government structures (also see Salzstein, 1986; Warner et al., 1989).

Three styles of policing

The historical roots of Wilson’s Varieties can be traced back to the scholarship being produced in political science in the early 1960s. At that time the documentation of the relationship between local governmental institutional arrangements, prevailing political values, and the resulting practices of government was a focus of scholarly inquiry in the discipline (see Dye, 2002, pp. 11–29; Orren
Wilson referred to the legalistic style of policing as relatively little input solicited from rank-and-file officers. Acting as "..." that the watchman style of policing was similar to the disorder in the local community. Wilson (1968) suggested attention in this setting was given to controlling social order-maintenance function of law enforcement. Primary mechanisms and functional rationality in achieving its goals. Decision making was overwhelmingly top-cally strictly hierarchical and decidedly specialized. Here, organizational structure of legalistic departments was typi-cal with situations that do not involve serious crime act as if order maintenance rather than law enforcement were their principal function" (Wilson, 1968, p. 140). In addition, Wilson noted the following with respect to these agencies: "The police are watchman-like not simply in emphasizing order over law enforcement but also in judging the seriousness of infractions less by what the law says about them than by their immediate and personal consequences..." (Wilson, 1968, p. 141).

Those police departments which manifested a service orientation were inclined to emphasize community residents’ satisfaction as a major organizational goal. Accordingly, police officers took all requests for both law enforcement and order maintenance seriously. Crimes such as burglaries and robberies took precedence over minor infractions of the law, and "arrests are avoided when possible but there will be frequent use of informal nonarrest sanctions..." (Wilson, 1968, p. 201). A good public relationship with the community, and responsiveness to community needs, were the major concerns of all ranks within the service style of policing law enforcement agency.

The predictor of policing styles: local political culture

After identifying these three styles of policing, Wilson (1968) argued that the major determinant of variation in police behavior was the prevailing local political culture:

Thus, police work is carried out under the influence of a political culture...By political culture is meant those widely shared expectations as to how issues will be raised, governmental objectives determined, and power for their attainment assembled; it is an understanding of what makes a government legitimate. (pp. 228–235)

Empirically, Wilson operationalized the concept of political culture as represented by the type of local government in existence where his subject police agencies were located. Four types of local government were identified: (1) high-professional council-manager, (2) low-professional council-manager, (3) nonpartisan mayor-council, and (4) partisan mayor-council. More specifically, cities with high-professional council-manager regimes were termed “good government” settings while cities with partisan mayor-council regimes were termed “traditional” government settings. Wilson clearly linked the “good government” form of local government and political culture with the legalistic style of policing. Not surprisingly, the emergence and development of the city manager position was a parallel phenomenon to the emergence of the bureaucratic model of policing-sharing the assumptions of the politics and administration dichotomy and the propriety of independent professional control of public organizations.

Wilson stated that the watchman style of policing was associated with the partisan mayor-council form of government and its underlying political culture. An important feature of this policing style was that the police department was continually open to the influence of local politics. Finally, a department with a service
Wilson (1968) hypothesized as follows:

…the more partisan the political system, the more politicians represent small geographic constituencies, and the more nonprofessional the executive head of the government, the more likely the city will have a political culture favorable to the watchman police style. By contrast, cities electing nonpartisan officials at large and vesting executive authority in a highly professional city manager will more likely have a political culture favoring the legalistic police style. (p. 272)

The findings reported by Wilson indicated a clear distinction between legalistic and watchman departments as judged from arrest rate patterns (disorderly conduct versus larceny and driving while intoxicated). The empirical results documented in this analysis supported Wilson’s hypothesis: “In sum, the theory that the political culture of a community constrains law enforcement styles survives the crude and inadequate statistical tests that available data permit” (Wilson, 1968, p. 276). In addition, the findings derived from his analysis of ICMA and FBI UCR data supported his hypothesis that the service style of policing emphasized both the law enforcement and order maintenance functions of policing.

It was interesting to note that the historical development of American policing in the first seven decades of the twentieth century witnessed the steady transformation from the watchman style of policing to a professional force that began with the push from the progressive movement and a group of reform-minded police administrators such as August Vollmer at Berkeley, California during the 1930s, and O. W. Wilson’s reform of the Chicago Police Department during the 1960s (Rubenstein, 1973; Walker, 1977). Kelling and Moore (1988) succinctly characterized the history of police reform as falling into three eras: the political, the reform, and the community eras. The political era captured the characteristics of the watchman style of policing in which the authority of policing was derived from the local community and politicians, while the authorization of policing in the reform era was clearly based on the rule of law.

Since the publication of Varieties, several scholars attempted to replicate Wilson’s findings. First, Langworthy (1985) examined 152 police agencies serving city populations over 100,000 in an attempt to demonstrate the viability of Wilson’s observations. Using FBI 1975 arrest data in the analysis, he found only partial support for Wilson’s theory. Langworthy wrote in this regard: “The expectation that arrest rates for larceny and driving while intoxicated would be higher in ‘good’ government cities than in traditional cities is supported” (Langworthy, 1985, p. 97). The socioeconomic characteristics of these 152 cities, however, were not controlled for in his analysis; hence these findings represent only a limited test of Wilson’s ideas.

Using a sample of small and medium-sized municipal police departments in Illinois, Crank (1990) tested competing factors (e.g., racial-cultural differentiation, economic conditions, organizational environment, and local political culture) using the number of police arrests reported by the State Police of Illinois for offenses such as trespass, disorderly conduct, cannabis control, and motor vehicle offenses. Crank’s findings revealed that the presence of a city-manager style of government was associated with significant increases in arrests for disorderly conduct, motor vehicle offenses, and cannabis control. Crank’s test of police behavior, however, did not employ the original measures of local political culture developed by Wilson. For example, local partisan election was not used to distinguish between different styles of local government structure (e.g., commission-council style of government). Similarly, Pursley (1976) found that the number of police departments with “reform” police chiefs was significantly higher in the council-manager type of governments than in mayor-council governments.

Recently, using data derived from a 1998 survey of large police agencies, researchers Hassell, Zhao, and Maguire (2003) also examined the relationship between styles of policing and law enforcement organizational
arrangements. According to Wilson, *formalization* (distribution of authority, senior management versus first line supervisor and number of rules), *vertical differentiation* (number of ranks), and *functional differentiation* (number of special units) should differ among the three categories of police agencies. For example, legalistic police departments are more likely to be formalized, centralized, and functionally limited than watchman police agencies. In this test of Wilson’s predictions, the empirical findings failed to support Wilson’s argument that structural arrangements among these three styles of policing vary predictably (Hassell et al., 2003).

The several studies summarized above found varying degrees of support for the salience of Wilson’s categories and the utility of his theory linking political culture to styles of policing. Given the influence of Wilson’s *Varieties* and the continuing widespread reporting of these linkages, it was indeed important to retest his theory using more contemporary data. Fortunately, an appropriate set of panel data captured at three points in time during the 1990s was available for such an analysis.

**Methodology**

**Data sources**

The information concerning local political culture used in this analysis was obtained through three waves of surveys of municipal agencies. The Division of Governmental Studies and Services (DGSS) at Washington State University conducted a series of agency surveys in 1993, in 1996, and again in 2000. The staff of DGSS conducted mail surveys directed to the same set of 281 municipalities located in forty-seven states in roughly three-year intervals since 1978. The cities in the original sample were selected from among those municipalities initially surveyed in a nationwide survey of cities of over 25,000 population conducted by the International City Management Association in 1969. In the 2000 round of the periodic survey, 233 cities (82.9 percent) in the sample participated. In year 1996, 244 (86.8 percent) cities completed and returned survey questionnaires. In 1993, the survey responses of 241 (85.8 percent) cities were available for analysis. The consistently high return rates yielded a core sample of 185 (65.85 percent) cities which returned completed survey instruments in all three national surveys.

Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation provides the information required on police arrests. UCR data are collected as part of a nationwide effort to gather data on crimes reported to police from approximately 17,000 state, county, and city law enforcement agencies voluntarily reporting reported crimes and police arrests in each jurisdiction. The data used here included the 1993, 1996, and 2000 UCR data on police arrests in the cities included in the current study. Only police agencies that reported complete twelve-month crime statistics in a given year were selected for the analysis. Wilson used the same categories of UCR arrest data some forty years ago. Lastly, data used for the four demographic characteristics in each city (i.e., city population, percentage of minority population, percentage of workforce unemployed, and percentage of young people from fifteen years to twenty-four years old) were derived from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census counts.

**Measures**

**Dependent variables**

Four dependent variables were used in this study: (1) larceny arrest rate per 1,000 population; (2) drunkenness arrest rate per 1,000 population; (3) DWI arrest rate per 1,000 population; and (4) disorderly conduct arrest rate per 1,000 population. In fixed-effect ordinary least square regression models using panel data, each of the four dependent variables was regressed on a set of independent variables (see Appendix A for model specifications).

**Independent variables**

In *Varieties*, Wilson identified three distinctive types of local political culture reflected in their structural arrangements for governance. More specifically, type of local mayoral election, relationship between city chief administrator and city council, previous experience of the administrator, and educational attainment of the administrator were all important characteristics used to determine the three types of prevailing local political culture. An earlier study on the influence of local political culture on police innovations showed that over 96 percent of city chief administrators had college degrees (using a sample of 281 cities with populations ranging from 25,000 to 3,000,000) (Zhao, 1996). This finding suggested that unlike the situation forty years ago, virtually all city administrators today possess a college degree. As a consequence of this fact, this particular item was excluded from the measure of local political culture.

Following Wilson’s coding method, the three types of local political culture were operationalized as: (1)
professional government: council-manager form of government, nonpartisan election, and the manager has previous experience in city management (which corresponds to legalistic style police agencies); (2) traditional government: mayor-council form of government and the mayoral election is partisan (which corresponds to watchman style police agencies); and (3) mixed type of government: mayor-council form of government where mayoral election is nonpartisan or council-manager government where the election is partisan (corresponding to service style police agencies). In this study, traditional government was treated as the reference group.

Control variables

In his study, Wilson controlled for the socioeconomic conditions in the cities under investigation. He included three aggregate demographic control measures: size, economic conditions, and racial composition. Wilson (1968, p. 272) argued that “controlling for such factors should eliminate any large differences in the true, but necessarily unknown, crime rate because crime varies significantly with city size, social class, and racial composition.”

Similar variables were used to control for the effects of socioeconomic factors. Four control variables were included in the analysis: (1) city (population) size; (2) percentage of minorities in a city (percentage of non-White); (3) percentage of unemployed; and (4) percentage of persons aged fifteen to twenty-four. Demographic data for all of these variables were obtained from the 1990 and 2000 decennial census counts of the U.S. population. Since the census data were available for each decade, the authors created a measure estimating the change in socioeconomic characteristics taking place over the period 1990 to 2000. The time-varying socioeconomic variables were estimated via a linear trend calculation (also see Kovandzic, Sloan, & Vieraitis, 2002).

In addition to these control variables, a total of forty-six state dummy (the first listed state in the data set, Alabama, was used as the reference group) and two years of observation dummy variables (i.e., 1996 and 2000, 1993 was the reference group) were included in the statistical analyses. Consideration of state and regional variations was important to incorporate in the analysis because numerous studies had demonstrated important geographic effects on the structure and operations of municipal police departments (Maguire, Kohns, Uchida, & Cox, 1997; Warner et al., 1989; Zhao & Lovrich, 1998).

Findings

This section reports the primary findings of the replication of Wilson’s theory of local political culture determinants of policing styles in U.S. cities. Descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analysis are shown in Table 1. Comparing across all four dependent variables in each of the three time periods, the arrest rates (per 1,000 population) were consistently ranked from high to low in the following order: larceny, drunkenness, DWI, and disorderly conduct. Although ANOVA tests revealed some overall differences in the four categories of arrest rates across three waves of data, more in-depth comparisons based on post hoc Bonferroni tests suggested more specific patterns. Statistically significant between-years (i.e., year 2000 compared to year 1996; and year 2000 compared to year 1993) differences were found in the larceny, DWI, and disorderly conduct arrest rates. The only statistically significant difference between drunkenness arrest rates was found in the year 2000 and year 1993 comparison.

The majority of the municipalities included in the sample had either a professional council-manager type of government (varying from 39 percent to 44 percent in the year 2000 and year 1993 comparison.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
<td>Mean (S.D.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny rate</td>
<td>5.64 (3.32)</td>
<td>7.71 (4.32)</td>
<td>7.91 (4.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(per 1,000 pop.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunkenness rate</td>
<td>5.03 (4.32)</td>
<td>3.67 (4.91)</td>
<td>2.70 (10.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorderly rate</td>
<td>1.63 (4.46)</td>
<td>2.53 (3.80)</td>
<td>1.63 (4.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>1.30 (0.96)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.96)</td>
<td>0.64 (2.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional government</td>
<td>0.41 (0.49)</td>
<td>0.39 (0.49)</td>
<td>0.44 (0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>0.13 (0.32)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.32)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed type</td>
<td>0.46 (0.50)</td>
<td>0.47 (0.50)</td>
<td>0.42 (0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (x 100,000)</td>
<td>1.88 (3.39)</td>
<td>1.90 (3.00)</td>
<td>1.81 (3.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent minority</td>
<td>38.71 (22.90)</td>
<td>34.88 (21.88)</td>
<td>29.90 (20.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent unemployed</td>
<td>6.68 (2.88)</td>
<td>6.80 (2.74)</td>
<td>6.81 (3.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent 15-24 years old</td>
<td>15.58 (5.34)</td>
<td>15.84 (4.83)</td>
<td>16.14 (5.11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Anova test, p < .05.
* Post hoc Bonferroni test, 2000 and 1996, p < .05.
* Post hoc Bonferroni test, 1996 and 1993, p < .05.
* Post hoc Bonferroni test, 2000 and 1993, p < .05.
Why is political culture no longer a strong predictor of patterns of organizational behavior among large (varying from 42 percent to 47 percent in three waves of data). The average city population in the sample varied from 181,000 (in 1993) to 190,000 (in 1996) and to 188,000 (in 2000). The mean percentage minority population in the sample varied from about 30 percent (in 1993) to about 39 percent (in 2000), a statistically significant increase. The mean percentage of workforce unemployment remained relatively stable, at slightly less than 7 percent in the time periods ranging from 1993 to 2000. The average population of young people (age fifteen to twenty-four) also remained rather stable in the same time period, averaging about 16 percent.

Table 2 reports the impact of political culture on two major categories of police arrests: law enforcement oriented (larceny and DWI) and order maintenance-related (drunkenness and disorderly conduct). According to Wilson (1968, p. 274), legalistic police agencies, which were located in communities with professional political cultures, should have higher arrest rates for the first two offense types. Watchman-style police departments, which were located in communities with traditional political cultures, should have higher arrest rates on the latter two offense types. The results of these analyses suggested that political culture, as measured by the forms of municipal government, had no statistically significant impact on either law enforcement oriented or order maintenance oriented police arrests.

In contrast, significant effects were found in selected social demographic variables. For example, the percentage of young people living in a given city was positively related to DWI and disorderly conduct-related police arrests in that city. Unemployment rate was positively associated with disorderly conduct-related arrests, but not with the other types of arrests. In addition, the percentage of minority population was negatively associated with DWI-related arrests, but that variable was unrelated to the other types of arrests under investigation. Among the two year dummy variables included in the analyses, year 2000 was a statistically significant predictor for all four types of police arrest rates. Controlling for all the other variables, there were more DWI, drunkenness, and disorder conduct–related arrests in year 2000 compared to those of 1993. Larceny arrest rates for the year 2000, however, were significantly lower that those of 1993. Overall, with the addition of state dummy variables, the regression models explained between 30 percent and 52 percent of the variation in the dependent variables.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to reassess the utility of Wilson’s theory of the linkage between local political culture and styles of policing as evidenced in aggregate arrest rates for various reported crimes. Longitudinal agency survey data collected in 1993, 1996, and 2000 from 185 U.S. cities were utilized in the analysis. In addition, the authors controlled for both time and place (state) in the statistical model, and the authors used essentially the same variables as those used by Wilson nearly forty years ago. Overall, the findings did not find support for Wilson’s theory of local political culture in explaining today’s police organizational behavior. There was no evidence of the effect of local government culture as specified by James Q. Wilson on arrest rates among these many contemporary American police agencies.
Police agencies? The authors would like to offer three speculations that center on the changes in the character of police work taking place over the course of the past forty years. The first speculation concerns the dramatic increase in crime rates occurring shortly after the completion of Wilson’s study in the mid-1960s. The historical trend of crime rates in the U.S. was that crime incidents per 100,000 population began to climb rapidly in the late 1960s. Based on the Uniform Crime Report of the FBI, the rate of increase was even faster in the 1970s and 1980s than it had been in the late 1960s. Fear of crime, particularly violent street crime captured the attention of ordinary Americans (e.g., Wilson, 1985). Police agencies across the nation witnessed politicians at all levels of government using the fear of crime in their political appeals, and “getting tough on crime” once elected to office (Lyons, 2002; Scheingold, 1984).

Studies conducted in the 1990s had documented the fact that police agencies, large and small alike, consistently rated crime control as their top priority followed by social disorder regardless of their local crime rate and regardless of social demographic factors (Zhao, He, & Lovrich, 2003). Similarly, scholars of American policing had long argued that law enforcement was the core mission of contemporary American police agencies (Bittner, 1970; Cao, 2004; Manning, 1988).

The second speculation concerned change in the organizational arrangements in place within contemporary police agencies. In the mid-1960s, specialization (number of special units) and formalization (rules and policies) were rather limited among police organizations. Consequently, Wilson found that police departments characterized as watchman style did not have much formalization and specialization compared to their counterparts of legalistic style. Since the period in which Wilson conducted his studies, police departments had changed significantly in this regard, as a result of both external and internal pressures. Formalization, for example, is a major feature of organizational life in contemporary law enforcement, virtually all agencies maintained detailed policy and procedure documents. In fact, research studies consistently point to formalization as a major trait of contemporary American law enforcement agencies (Langworthy, 1986; Zhao, 1996).

In the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (1999) survey, virtually all of the large police agencies reported having internal policies on use of force, code of conduct and appearance, the handling of domestic disputes, hot pursuits, etc. In terms of external pressures, the data used for this article indicated that around 20 percent of municipal police departments surveyed in 1993, 1996, and 2000 were under court order to promote equal employment opportunity by hiring additional minority and female officers. Organizational change in this area is not a luxury, but rather more of a necessity for contemporary police agencies. The authors can use the Omaha Police Department as a case in point to illustrate how much has changed in this area over the years. The Omaha Police Department has been transformed from a watchman style of policing operation to a professional style of policing organization without a corresponding change in local government structure.

According to the Wilson classification of policing styles, the Omaha Police Department should adhere to the watchman style (mayor-council type of government with partisan election). In fact, however, the Omaha P.D. is highly differentiated in operations by having a gang unit, organized crime unit, traffic unit, pawn unit, and even a nuisance unit. At the same time, the department is highly formalized featuring extensive policies on use of force, racial profiling, hot pursuit, etc. In addition, Wilson observed in the watchman style police departments he studied that educational requirements were minimal: “In none of the three cities has a high school diploma been required for entrance into the force and many officers could not meet such a requirement were it imposed” (Wilson, 1968, p. 152). Today, over 50 percent of police officers in the Omaha Police Department possess a college degree. Finally, Wilson found that police officers working in watchman style departments tended to be poorly paid: “Patrolmen are locally recruited, paid low salaries, expected to have second jobs” (Wilson, 1968, p. 151). The entry-level salary for an Omaha police officer is the highest in the metropolitan area (featuring over fifteen agencies).

The third speculation is related to the expanding influence of the federal government in law enforcement policies and practices. There has been significant federal government involvement with respect to how police work should be conducted. Prior to Wilson’s study, the influence of the federal government on local law enforcement agencies was rather minimal. Since the 1970s, however, the federal government has played a much more important role in influencing the organizational behavior of police agencies across the entire country. Walker (1999) observed that in the late 1960s, American police agencies emerged in the national spotlight. Presidential commissions and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) collectively played a major part in professionalizing law enforcement agencies. In 1973, the American Bar Association (ABA) published its Standards Relating to the Urban Police Function. This was a reflection of a growing body of research on policing and the emergence...
of a deeper level of understanding of the role that police departments should play in a democratic society on the part of major stakeholder groups in American society (Walker, 1999, p. 35).

In the most recent concrete example of such an understanding, the Crime Control Act of 1994 emphasized the systematic redeployment of police resources into community policing activities. Over 11,000 law enforcement agencies had received federal funding (around $7 billion) distributed through the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Along with those funds, these agencies have had to adapt themselves to federal requirements for building police-community partnerships. All of these federal and associated state efforts to promote community policing have contributed in a major way to the standardization of police work, which in turn reduces the influence of local political culture on police policies and practices.

This article calls into question one of the most classic pieces of scholarship in the policing. Wilson’s important demonstration of the creative application of empirical methods to the development of theory in policing is routinely cited in textbooks and in scholarly writings about the police. This article makes the argument that new research is needed to examine the effect of local political culture on contemporary policing in the U.S., and notes that a theory which once could be relied upon to explain variation of police practices across local government jurisdictions can no longer serve that function. Such is likely the case in a good deal of social sciences, and social scientists would be wise to revisit their favorite theories in the way that was done here with Wilson’s classic work. This analysis was not intended to demean the foundational work of James Q. Wilson, but rather to deepen the authors’ understanding of the limitations of that work and demonstrate the wisdom of the periodic replication of classic social science scholarship (see Cao, 2003).

Appendix A. Statistical model

The authors used pooled cross-sectional time-series (or panel data) analysis in the study reported here. Based on a set of well-established criteria from the field of econometrics (cf. Baltagi, 2001; Judge, Hill, Griffiths, Lutkepohl, & Lee, 1988), the authors specified fixed-effects model estimation as the most appropriate technique for the study. The Breusch and Pagan Lagrangian multiplier test for random effects and the Hausman specification test were examined systematically. The Hausman test results indicated that coefficients associated with fixed-effect and random-effects models were significantly different from one another. The Breusch and Pagan test results weighed in favor of the fixed-effect model.

The general model can be written as:

$$Y_{it} = \beta'X_{it} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + e_{it}$$

$$E_{it} = E_{sit} = 0$$

$$E_{it} = \alpha_i, \quad E_{itj} = 0 \text{ for } i \neq j$$

$$E_{itjs} = \sigma^2, \quad \text{if } i \neq j \text{ and } t \neq s \quad (E_{itjs} = 0, \text{ otherwise})$$

where $Y_{it}$ was the dependent variable for city $i$ at year $t$. The symbol $X_{it}$ represented a set of explanatory variables, and $e_{it}$ represented the error term. The state-specific effect was measured by $\alpha_i$ (forty-six state dummies were used out of a total of forty-seven states included in the sample, Alabama was the reference category). The time-specific component $\gamma_t$ represented two year dummy variables (1996 and 2000, 1993 was the reference category) that controlled for the unknown factors affecting the variation in policing styles that were not accounted for by the other variables. It was also assumed that $\alpha_i, \gamma_t$, and $e_{it}$ were uncorrelated with $Y_{it}$ (Baltagi, 2001; Hsiao, 1995, 2003; Judge et al., 1988).

References
