Cooperation in Crisis? 
An Analysis of Cross-Border Intermunicipal Relations in the Detroit-Windsor Region

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Abstract

The Detroit-Windsor region is linked by the automotive industry, significant cross-border labor and recreation flows, cultural similarities, and social problems stemming from the economic downturn. According to theories of cross-border cooperation this case should be one characterized by a degree of institutional integration and intermunicipal coordination. In reality, very few cross-border political relationships exist between local authorities in the region, even in this time of mutual crisis. This paper investigates the reasons for weak cross-border integration by comparing testing theory against practice and argues that existing theoretical frameworks do not satisfactorily account for observed patterns of cooperation in the region. It suggests several areas so far underdeveloped in existing theoretical perspectives and elaborates potential avenues for future research.

Keywords: cross-border cooperation; intermunicipal relations; integration; Windsor; Detroit; Canada; United States
BROKEN CITIES: WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER?

The cities of Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario may be physically separated by the Detroit River and an international border but their fortunes are very much intertwined. The city-regions that center on these two cities on either side of the border are both heavily dependent on the automotive sector and their urban experience has mirrored the steady decline of the industry. The city of Detroit is often portrayed as the epicenter of the crisis but this obscures the fact that the impact of the crisis is regional. The auto region initially developed in and around the central city of Detroit and Wayne County but manufacturing activity has since expanded into over 190 municipalities within five Michigan counties: Genesee, Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne (Farley, Danzinger and Holzer, 2000; Jacobs, 2003; Schoenberger and Harkness, 1993). In fact, most of the auto-related production still active in Metro Detroit1 is located in the suburban counties.

However, industrial decentralization also favored Canadian municipalities. Due to its proximity to the Motor City the Windsor-Essex region developed the concentration of automotive-related enterprises and employment in Canada. Holmes, Rutherford and Fitzgibbon (2005) estimate that there were approximately 500 plants with production related directly or indirectly with the auto industry that employed over 48,000 workers in 2004. Despite a relatively high level of market decentralization many of these plants and jobs are highly dependent on proximity to Big Three assembly capacity in the Detroit region. As Detroit’s auto sector ails so too do the fortunes of its Canadian neighbor. A 12.7% unemployment rate in the fourth quarter of 2009, the highest in Canada, attests to parallel decline of the Windsor-Essex region. Metro Detroit also tops unemployment tables in the US with a rate of 14.8% in April of 2010. In this context it is not surprising that Windsor has earned the nickname the “Canada’s Detroit”.

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As a consequence of the downturn communities on both sides of the border are struggling with similar problems. Industrial decline has resulted in job losses, labor flight, population loss, high vacancy rates in commercial and residential properties, high levels of foreclosure and other symptoms of urban decay. The leadership of these twin “broken cities” should have much to discuss about how to address common challenges and coordinate innovative responses to industrial revitalization and metropolitan renewal. Yet this paper finds little communication between the two regions, much less cooperation.

Perhaps this lack of collaboration should not be surprising. Despite strong socio-economic integration across the international border institutional integration and political cooperation between local authorities has typically been weak (Brunet-Jailly 2000). On its own this binary relationship of strong economic cross-border economic linkages and distant political relationships between communities stands as something of a puzzle. In such a context, the onset of a common threat in the form of economic crisis is likely to have some effect on intergovernmental relationships at the local level. Crisis can be a powerful catalyst to the creation, or dissolution, of cooperative partnerships. Either increased competition between local authorities for investment or jobs creates increased tension or the presence of shared challenges can bring actors together to pool resources. Currently, the acute downturn of the 2007 recession has had virtually no effect on cross-border relations.

This paper confronts these two puzzles. Why has there been so little cross-border cooperation or institutional integration between local actors in the Detroit-Windsor region? In order to investigate this question this paper first surveys the theoretical literature on cross-border cooperation in an effort to determine more generally what factors affect the evolution of partnerships in these kinds of regions. The Detroit-Windsor context is then analyzed relative to theoretical expectations. This analysis finds that while theory identifies a few potential barriers to cooperation in this region on the whole these factors alone do not decisively explain weak cooperation. The paper explores alternative and additional explanations for the cooperative dynamics observed in the Detroit-Windsor case and suggests areas for future research. Among these is the potentially catalytic role of crisis on the development of cooperative relationships. This section contains a preliminary
investigation of the effect an advent of common challenges has had on interlocal relationships in this region. The response, or non-response, to the economic crisis surrounding the auto industry is contrasted with the emergence of collaborative efforts to reopen the border following the suspension of vehicular crossings imposed directly after 9-11. The paper concludes with some thoughts about the contrast between North American and European cases and offers some critical reflection on the theory and study of relationships in cross-border regions.

The findings of this analysis are preliminary and primarily highlight a need for more research. However, this paper makes an important contribution to the study of governance in cross-border regions as one of the only studies that attempts to empirically test a wide range of theories of cross-border cooperation. In so doing it tries to minimize the division in the empirical and theoretical literature between North American and European cases. North American cases are often characterized as different or exceptional relative to their European counterparts (Blatter and Clement 2000; Clarke 2001; Scott 1999). Despite differences in political culture, historical context, geographical pre-conditions successful theories about the emergence and evolution of cross-border relationships between local authorities should apply equally to all cases. That is, given what is known of the cases and contexts interlocal relationships should unfold in expected ways. This paper does not claim to develop such a theory but suggests some new directions of interest to scholars working in this field.

EVALUATING CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE DETROIT-WINDSOR AREA

In absolute terms, cooperation between governments and authorities across the Canada-US border occurs quite frequently with respect to the Detroit-Windsor region. However, it is the scale and pattern of these partnerships that is most significant to this analysis. Table 1 highlights several cross-border partnerships in which the cities of Detroit and Windsor are direct or indirect participants. When categorized according to the geographical scope of participants and sources of initiative these partnerships reveal a proliferation of cross-border linkages, but a
pattern of weak cross-border institutional integration and weak metropolitan cooperation.

This study is primarily interested in investigating the character and emergence of cooperation between local authorities across borders at the scale of the metropolitan region. For the purposes of this project, interlocal cooperation is defined as: “The voluntary association of governmental and non-governmental organizations in a defined geographic area for the purpose of controlling or regulating behavior within and performing functions or providing services for the overall territory. These organizations are not required to cooperate and cannot be compelled to cooperate or comply with decisions that are taken by cooperating entities” (Norris 2001, 36).

Cooperation at the metropolitan scale implies partnerships between three or more local authorities to address issues of significance to the broader metropolitan region. These partnerships need not include participants from all, or even most, of the local authorities within the cross-border metropolitan region. Rather, what is important is that cooperation is based on a common interest in an area that may affect the attractiveness or prosperity of the wider metropolitan area. Such issue areas might include economic development, regional marketing, transportation or environmental management. Additionally, because this study focuses on a cross-border region, metropolitan partnerships should include at least one local actor from either side of the border.

Focusing on the metropolitan (i.e. multilateral) partnerships is one way to evaluate the state of regionalism in a given cross-border region. A cross-border metropolitan area may be characterized by deep socio-economic linkages and thus be perceived functionally as one region. However, that does not necessarily mean that it functions as a single region. Regionalism refers to the extent to which local authorities recognize the scope of the socio-economic region and acknowledge their position as an actor within that region in the course of governing their jurisdictions.

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2 For the purposes of this study the metropolitan region is a statistically defined entity such as the American metropolitan statistical area (MSA), Canadian census metropolitan area (CSA) or European larger urban zone (LUZ). Where cross-border regions are not statistically recognized as a single metropolitan area, as in the case of Detroit-Windsor, the cross-border metropolitan region includes both the MSA and CSA (or analogous statistical areas in other cross-national contexts).
This political acknowledgement takes the form of participation in metropolitan governance – intermunicipal cooperation and coordination – the intensity of which can be measured in terms of institutional integration. While this paper concentrates on metropolitan governance it does not ignore cooperation that occurs at other scales. Both bilateral interlocal relationships and multilateral partnerships beyond the metropolitan region can provide important insights into the interests and motivations of local actors. The distribution of participation in partnerships at each level is also an important indicator of how local authorities perceive their political environment and value scales of engagement.

Table 1 suggests that both metropolitan scale multilateral cross-border cooperation and institutional integration of the Detroit-Windsor region are relatively weak. Bi-lateral interlocal partnerships, while numerous (for instance, multiple mutual aid agreements exist), have low levels of institutional integration. Joint events on the Detroit River, such as the Red Bull Air Race, required coordination between local authorities, but no formal agreements or joint management. An agreement between universities in located in Detroit and Windsor to consider students from across the border as local residents and to permit students to take courses at both institutions requires administrative coordination, but little political integration. There are also conventions that actors on either side of the border consult one another on issues of mutual concern. For instance, local water utilities on either side of the river consult on projects and quality issues. However, neither their governance nor service delivery is integrated across the international boundary. The Detroit-Windsor Tunnel Corporation is the most integrated instance of interlocal cooperation to manage the tunnel river crossing between the two cities. Even this corporation is established as a partnership, rather a single joint entity, between tunnel corporations on either side of the border.3 This reluctance to create a single joint corporation is emblematic of cross-border intermunicipal relationships in the region.

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3 A plan to sell the Detroit corporation to the city of Windsor to create a single entity was recently thwarted as council overturned a mayoral veto in the wake of a corruption scandal surrounding Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick.
Table 1. Cross-border initiatives with direct or indirect participation by the cities of Detroit and Windsor and the surrounding metropolitan region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interlocal (bi-lateral)</th>
<th>Metropolitan/Interregional (multilateral)</th>
<th>International (led by senior levels of government)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutual aid agreements, i.e. fire protection</td>
<td>TranslinkeD (Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce, Windsor-Essex)</td>
<td>Great Lakes Commission/International Joint Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint events, i.e. Red Bull Air Race</td>
<td>Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative</td>
<td>Detroit River International Crossing Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit-Windsor Tunnel Corporation</td>
<td>Detroit River Tunnel Partnership</td>
<td>Ontario Michigan Declaration of Partnership and MOU on Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University exchange agreements</td>
<td>Northern Border for Economic Security &amp; Trade (NBEST)</td>
<td>Ontario Michigan MOU on Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions of consultation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Council of Great Lakes Governors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ontario-Michigan Border Transportation Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Great Lakes Information Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: the author.

There are far fewer metropolitan and interregional partnerships in the Detroit-Windsor region and institutional integration is also quite weak. For instance, TranslinkeD, is a regional transportation and logistics strategy centered primarily on Detroit. As an initiative of the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce it recognizes the importance of the cities and infrastructure directly across the Canadian border and has included Canadian officials in their discussions. The Detroit River Tunnel Partnership and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative are both organizations that include local authorities on both sides of the border among their participants. The Northern Border for Economic Security and Trade (NBEST) is a bi-national coalition of firms and public actors with the mission to improve the security and efficiency of the Detroit-Windsor border crossing. This initiative was led by the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce and is a forum for local government and industry concerned with the implications of tightening security on regional cross-border mobility. However, all of these operate at a scale much larger than the metropolitan region, include few local participants aside from representatives from the large central cities, or were initiated from outside of the region. International partnerships revolve around three main issue areas: trade, environmental issues related to the Great Lakes and boundary rivers,
and the border crossing. Local authorities in the Detroit-Windsor region are formal participants in some of these initiatives and informally included in others. These international partnerships, typically led by state, provincial or federal levels of government via the relevant ministries and departments all address topics of great concern to municipalities in the region but the policy process is very much driven by international, rather than regional, interests.

While this list does not capture all cross-border partnerships it does include the most visible and frequently mentioned instances of intermunicipal governance and cooperation. The fact that the first two columns of Table 1 are so short relative to the third is a fairly damning reflection of regionalism in the Detroit-Windsor area. What accounts for this weakness of cooperative ties between local authorities across the border in this region? The following section turns to theories of cross-border dynamics to structure an investigation into this question.

**DETERMINANTS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION**

The scholarship on cross-border relationships proposes a wide variety of factors that can affect institutional integration across political boundaries. These can be broadly classified as factors that relate to local contexts, functional interdependencies, civic networks and asymmetries. Table 2 summarizes these categories and highlights their theorized impact on cross-border relationships. Together these constitute a meta-theoretical framework of the determinants of cross-border partnerships that unifies the major contributions of the literature.

Such a theoretical framework can then be tested in empirical cases to investigate the relative impact of each of the variables on observed relationships. It is expected that at least one, or a combination, of these broad factors should explain patterns of intermunicipal cooperation across borders.

Contextual variables are the institutional and spatial conditions that can shape the relationships between actors in cross-border regions. This summary vastly simplifies the wide range of contextual determinants into two broad sub-categories: geographical preconditions and intergovernmental context. Generally speaking, local actors have a limited ability to influence the actions of senior levels of
government or regional spatial configurations. Therefore, contextual variables can provide a relatively stable basis for comparison of institutional integration.

Table 2: Factors affecting cross-border institutional integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Category</strong></th>
<th><strong>Variable Type</strong></th>
<th><strong>Significance to Cross-Border Relationships</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td></td>
<td>The size, scale, location, position relative to the border, and fragmentation of local authorities can determine the scope of potential partners; balances of power and centers of gravity; the significance of the region to senior levels of government; and number of players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Intergovernmental</td>
<td>The attitudes and actions of senior levels of government can influence the propensity of local actors to cooperate. Cooperation may be more likely where: relationships between senior levels of government across the border are harmonious; senior levels empower local authorities; or senior levels incentivize and support regional cross-border institutional integration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Interdependencies</td>
<td>Economics and Interests</td>
<td>Economic linkages and functional integration can create common interests and incentives for cooperation. Regions are linked by: commuting patterns; labor markets; market forces and trade flows; regional innovation systems and clusters; and common resources and infrastructure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Culture and Community</td>
<td>A common sense of belonging; shared norms and a sense of community can ease cooperation based on: linguistic, ethnic or religious similarities; similar political cultures; specific regional identities; and shared experiences and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Networks</td>
<td>Civic Capital</td>
<td>Local networks, leadership and policy communities organized at the regional scale are important agents of cross-border coordination – they recognize the value of and initiate connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymmetries</td>
<td>Symmetries and Asymmetries</td>
<td>Congruence of local governments and local conditions can increase commonality of interests and reduce friction in cooperation. Some important areas of symmetry are: institutional and political processes; development history; industrialization and sectoral development; standards of living and social conditions; access to resources; and autonomy and power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: the author

Geography describes the spatial configurations that characterize cross-border metropolitan regions. Regions can be differentiated by the relative size of their municipalities, the location and distribution of localities relative to the border, the positioning of economic and political centers of gravity relative to other municipalities and the border, and the fragmentation of local authorities. These factors structure the range of potential partners, the number of potential players in cross-border partnerships, general balances of power and centers of political influence, and can affect the relative importance of the metropolitan region for
senior levels of government. Factors such metropolitan polycentricity can change confer certain benefits on efforts to build interjurisdictional partnerships and create unique challenges. The spatial proximity of metropolitan cores and the distribution of population relative to the border can influence the likelihood of regional cooperation. In regions with larger numbers of potential participants in cross-border cooperation the more difficult it may be to establish these relationships (Heddebaut 2004; Olson, 1965). Geography is rarely alone determinative of institutional integration. Rather it shapes the context within which actors formulate strategies and make decisions about participating in cross-border relationships.

The relationship between different tiers of government and between non-local governments across international borders shapes the intergovernmental context in cross-border regions. Cross-border partnerships and institutional integration between local governments may be more likely where the relationships between senior levels of government on either side of the border are harmonious and productive. Serious international conflict in a regional setting can be a serious barrier to the development of long-term transboundary relationships based on trust and a perception of mutual interest (Scott, et al. 1997; Scott 1999). More broadly, the presence of international organizations and international institutions can influence the development of cross-border linkages (Brunet-Jailly 2006; Haas 1958). The relationship between local and senior levels of government shapes the autonomy of local actors to establish cross-border relationships. Where local governments are empowered and supported by a “decentralization-friendly” administrative culture cross-border cooperation may be established more successfully. Of course, where senior levels of government directly and actively encourage cross-border regional partnerships these are more likely to form and stimulate institutional integration. Programs such as EU INTERREG initiatives have since 1989 both incentivized and institutionalized cross-border cooperation between local governments to define regional transborder policies. These exercises in multilevel governance are examples of and could potentially catalyze further cooperative cross-border initiatives (Brunet-Jailly 2005; Perkmann 2003).

Cross-border partnerships are more likely to emerge in regions characterized by significant functional interdependence. Functional interdependencies are the wide range of basic linkages that communities may have as well as social
similarities. Cross-border regions can be linked by economics and interests or by culture and community. Communities can be linked by communter patterns and labour markets, market forces and trade flows (Brunet-Jailly 2005), and joint jurisdiction over linking infrastructure. Cross-border regions can be part of the same regional innovation system linked not only by commercial interactions, but knowledge flows and innovation processes. Community and cultural similarities can also create important interdependencies and contribute to the construction of a regional identity. Linguistic, ethnic, religious and cultural communities are more likely to cooperate across an international border to enhance integration (Anderson, O'Dowd and Wilson 2003; Brunet-Jailly 2006; Gualini 2003; Herzog 1991; Konrad and Nicol 2008). Cultural commonalities underpin the shared norms, understanding, codes of conduct, shared experiences and values, and sense of community that contribute to the formation of regional identities. Strong linkages of this type can minimize the potential for conflict that may arise from other, less ingrained, sources. Most simply, where there are strong cultural and community similarities combined with frequent economic interactions, the alignment of interests between actors is more likely.

Socio-economic congruence is often embodied in cross-border civic networks. Local networks and policy communities in cross-border regions can be important agents of cooperation. These can be institutionalized organizations or associations active at the regional scale, or informal interpersonal networks. The proliferation networks contribute to the formation of regional identities and cultures even though they are typically not constructed for that purpose. Regional networks can also be active in catalyzing greater cross-border cooperation and integration and leading regional initiatives. Civic linkages affect the local political activism and organizational capacity of borderland communities and have been characterized as symbolic regimes, an element of political clout (Brunet-Jailly 2005), and a form of relational proximity. The concept of civic capital unites many of these perspectives and argues that cooperation between local actors is affected by the proliferation of civic networks organized at or oriented towards the regional scale. Civic capital identifies an important role for local leaders, or civic entrepreneurs, in identifying regional opportunities, initiating connections between networks, and creating the capacity for cross-border relationships.
Finally, while commonalities and linkages between communities may be important pre-conditions for intermunicipal cooperation and institutional integration asymmetries can be significant barriers. Asymmetries can exist on a variety of levels: standards of living, wage scales, and other socio-economic indicators; demography, population size, and population dynamics; access of governments to resources; local power and autonomy; sectoral development and the degree of industrialization; the issue of local power and the degree of political decentralization; similarities and differences in political culture and legal traditions; and degree of cultural and linguistic affinities across national boundaries (Gualini 2003; Scott, et al. 1997). The potential sources of asymmetry are too numerous to catalogue. However, the essential point is that asymmetries may affect the alignment of interests – the incentives for cooperation – and/or the capacity of local actors to initiate regional partnerships.

These five categories circumscribe a wide array of factors that have been proposed as determinants of cross-border relationships. It should be noted that some contributions –Brunet-Jailly (2005), Gualini (2003) and Konrad and Nicol (2008) – present theoretical frameworks that consist of several interacting variables. This analysis has included their constituent parts in the relevant categories. Logically, if all of the elements of the frameworks are relevant, then the broader categories into which they have been classified should all prove significant when tested empirically. However, these more comprehensive theories of cross-border interactions should also be recognized as cohesive approaches that are not necessarily reducible to the sum of their parts.

COMPARING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE DETROIT-WINDSOR REGION

This section applies the preceding theoretical framework to patterns of intermunicipal cooperation and institutional integration in the Detroit-Windsor region. This is partly an intellectual exercise – to test the influence of different variables on cross-border cooperation – and partly a practical attempt to explain the relative absence of intermunicipal relationships spanning the Detroit River. Because this is a single case study the results should not be considered generalizable.
However, this case does suggest some interesting theoretical implications for further study.

This initial analysis finds that, in the Detroit-Windsor region only intergovernmental context stands out as a serious barrier to cross-border intermunicipal cooperation. These conclusions are based on an analysis of secondary sources complemented by fifteen face to face interviews with local officials involved in economic development in local governments and in civic associations on either side of the border conducted between January and June 2010.

Geography has played very little role in shaping relationships between municipalities in this region. The American metropolitan region dwarfs and dominates the Canadian side in terms of population, economic significance, and density. This geographic asymmetry could potentially affect cooperation in a number of ways – by reducing the interest of American actors in engaging with Canadian actors (because they’re seen as insignificant) or by Canadian actors’ reticence to participate fearing their interests may be dominated by those south of the border. However, none of the local officials surveyed identified either of these scenarios as reasons for low cross-border cooperation. In other ways geography should have encouraged close cooperation. The metropolitan cores of the region – the cities of Detroit and Windsor – are located directly next to each other on opposite sides of the Detroit River. Despite the physical barrier of the river, the spatial proximity of the two lead municipalities in the region should have made cooperation between them much more likely.

The intergovernmental context is, however, much more complex and has perhaps the most significant effect of the framework factors on cross-border cooperation. The relationship between Canadian and American governments has been, for the most part, peaceful and amicable. As one Canadian Prime Minister expressed: “Let no one seek to devalue the achievements of our friendship by glossing over its occasional difficulties. It is true that, as is not uncommon among lifelong friends, we have sometimes had serious differences of opinion, misunderstood each other, struggled against each other’s competing ambitions. […] The true nature of our international relationship, however, is revealed by the fact that it is defined not by our differences, but by our capacity and eagerness to resolve them”. (Trudeau 1976, iii; emphasis added).
Arguably, this sentiment is just as true today as it was in 1976. There has been little conflict between the two countries that would derail cooperation at the regional level. However, peaceful intergovernmental relations are only one dimension of the intergovernmental context. The degree to which senior levels of government empower their local counterparts to engage in regional partnerships and incentivize such behavior is another important component. Local governments in the region are not particularly endowed with the capacity to engage in cross-border policy making. Municipal governments in Canada and the US are governed by slightly different legislative traditions. They are both the domain of their state or provincial governments and have only narrowly-defined powers. In practice, however, many American states enact legislation (home rule), which delegates a wider array of powers from the state, creates a degree of local autonomy, and limits the degree to which the state can intervene in local decisions. Consequently, municipalities on the US side of the border have more latitude to engage in regional cooperation. These slight differences in degrees of autonomy were not considered significant barriers to cross-border cooperation by the local officials interviewed. They reasoned that in most areas where cooperation was most likely no additional powers or state intervention would be necessary.

Local empowerment is more than just a product of the legislative environment. In Europe, the consolidation of cross-border regions is encouraged by EU structural funding and territorial cohesion initiatives. No such programs exist with respect to the Canada-US border regions. Cross-border regional development is not on the agenda of either state or federal governments. In fact, one American official suggested that Michigan state economic development policies have focused on and incentivized intermunicipal cooperation and regional development efforts within the state at the expense of the potentially more crucial border region. While such internal focus is not unexpected it is an interesting contrast to European cases in which national and regional governments are very interested in developing cross-border regions – particularly at key choke points for trade and commerce. As it happens governments on both sides of the Canada-US border are very concerned with cross-border issues that center on the Detroit-Windsor region. However, their strategy has been to maintain primary responsibility for cross-border governance within the state/provincial and federal tiers of governance, and only minimally
engage local actors (Scott 1999). The list of cross-border initiatives in Table 1 is in part reflective of this strategy. While local governments may have influence in International cross-border initiatives they are dominated by other levels of government.

The Detroit-Windsor region is of critical importance to senior levels of government and international relations because it is such a key border crossing. It is one of the largest crossings and accounts for almost 30 percent of all Canada-US trade. Over 10,000 trucks cross the Ambassador Bridge alone each day. The travel patterns of individuals illustrate the degree to which the region is interconnected. Over 80 percent of passenger vehicle traffic across the border was local in nature between greater Windsor and greater Detroit. Most of the local cross-border traffic at peak hours is consists of travelers crossing the border for work. There are important labor market synergies in the region as over 3,500 Canadian health care workers commuted to the Detroit region on a daily basis in 2007. The region is also industrially linked by the auto industry. The industry is so integrated across the international border that it is estimated that the average car crosses the border seven times in the course of its production.

Community and cultural interdependencies are also quite strong in linking the region. Linguistic study has show that this region is characterized by a higher degree of cultural and linguistic similarity than many European regions. Another study reports a highly similar personal value system among college students on either side of the border due to a strong media-cultural acculturation process. A report on cross-border linkages states that the region around Detroit-Windsor “share commonalities in socio-cultural values and ideological communities, but not so much a common identity”. This qualification, that despite relatively deep cultural similarities the region lacks a common identity is perhaps quite significant. Although Lundqvist and Trippl (2009) argue that the lack of a regional identity is not a serious barrier to cross-border cooperation this may have broader implications for other determinants of regional cooperation.

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4 See Sutcliffe (2006 & 2008) about the influence of local authorities in the Detroit River International River International Crossing Study (DRIC).
Regional civic networks can be both a product and producer of regional identity. Patterns of frequent interaction shape how individuals and organizations define the communities they inhabit. Economically the region is quite integrated but civic networks have remained much less developed across the international border. A survey of major civic associations active in the region shows a definite division of functions where similar associations exist to serve constituencies and address similar issues on both sides of the border. While closer investigation reveals that there is often cross-border interaction between counterparts these relationships are typically informal and no more integrated than with similar counterpart organizations in other jurisdictions or states. Similarly, there are very few leaders – individuals or organizations – championing the cause of cross-border regionalism. This suggests that civic capital in the region is not very highly developed, which may reduce the imperative for local authorities to cooperate for regional development.

The influence of asymmetries in Detroit-Windsor is difficult to gauge. Asymmetries can impact the emergence of cooperation at two stages. For instance, asymmetries (in any area) may highlight differences to the extent that potential partners see no common ground or need to cooperate. If cooperation is attempted asymmetries – for example, in political institutions and processes – may make highlight differences in capacities and block the institutionalization of cross-border partnerships. Because so few cross-border partnerships exist between local governments in the region, it is logical to focus on the first challenge posed by asymmetry. Are there serious differences at the border that prevent local governments from considering each other as partners? The most pronounced asymmetries in the region are demographic and socio-economic. The Detroit region dwarfs its Canadian counterpart, yet officials on both sides deny that size difference is a significant issue. More salient to governments on the Detroit side is the depth of the financial and local government crisis in their region. Many American officials stated that the current crisis has resulted in local strategies of internal “damage control” dominating instincts for regional outreach. They argue that the distraction of the industrial restructuring, shrinking populations, and their broader implications, is one reason local authorities may not be as focused on cross-border issues. While this position is understandable it does not account for the historical lack of cross-
border cooperation (Detroit has not always been in crisis), nor for the simultaneous inactivity of Canadian local governments.

Some institutional asymmetries were also mentioned as a source of difficulty in engaging local counterparts in cross-border cooperation. Canadian and American local administrations are structured and selected in different ways. Some local bureaucrats in the US – for instance, Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) – are political appointments whereas in Canada they are more permanent positions. A Canadian CAO mentioned that it was sometimes difficult to maintain continuity in consulting her opposite in the US because that person kept changing with the political regimes. Other officials commented that it could be difficult to identify contacts because of differences in the way bureaucracies are structured. While these both represent legitimate problems they are relatively minor hurdles. If the cross-border agenda was considered important within these administrations that file would appear on the radar of incoming appointees. If contacting a counterpart were really a priority local officials could find someone without too much difficulty. These small irritations could be overcome if there was a serious will to cooperate.

From among the wide variety of factors that this theoretical framework considers few appear to be helpful in explaining the long-term and systemic lack of regionalism in Detroit-Windsor. Three points stand out from this analysis: (1) the relatively small amount of formal intermunicipal cooperation in the region results from a lack of cooperative impetus rather than from a failure to establish long-term partnerships; (2) the intergovernmental context does not actively empower local governments to cooperate and may, in fact, be a significant barrier to regionalism; (3) the lack of regional identity and few cross-border civic networks may point to a social and political tendency to direct activity inwards and away from the border even while living an integrated daily existence. In short, the ‘imagined’ border may be less porous than the actual border.

These three observations are most likely interrelated. National and state/provincial level governments are intensely interested in the border crossing and issues related to the border itself, such as governing boundary waters, issues of security and trade flows. They are not terribly concerned about the cross-border region itself (Scott 1999). While the urban decline of Detroit has captured the attention of American policy makers its link with Windsor has not entered into
political calculations. Similarly, Canadian politicians have focused on the difficulties facing the auto industry rather than on its gateway, the community of Windsor. Commissions and working groups and missions between senior levels of government on either side of the border abound, but municipalities are rarely formal participants. Security, trade and environmental governance are firmly the domain of the states, provinces and federal governments, and always have been. Even when local communities are significantly impacted their interests are dominated by those of much bigger players. This context may have profoundly affected the strategies of local governments and organizations. In this scenario it is reasonable for local actors to conclude that the best chance of influencing the cross-border policy making process is to appeal to the senior political actors on their side of the border. Because political centers of gravity are state and federal legislatures distant from the region local interests and organizations are consistently oriented away from each other and towards those with power. This might explain observed patterns of cooperation between local governments, but may also explain the divergent development of regional civic networks.

It is unclear how accurate this assessment might be. None of the official interviewed explicitly mentioned this tendency as a reason for low intermunicipal cooperation across the border. Local officials were interested in the possibilities partnership might hold and were almost unanimously convinced that collaboration would benefit all partners. The trouble is they couldn’t clearly articulate any policy area where they would like to see partnerships form other than to address local interests in areas already dominated by senior levels of government. Even then the potential goals of partnership were not evident. This speaks to a sort of tacit passivity amongst these borderlands governments that may be a product of the domination of senior political actors. As a result, it is possible that the center of gravity argument may be correct even if the actors themselves don’t recognize it.
THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND GAPS

While considering the puzzle of Detroit-Windsor’s weak cross-border cooperation despite a relatively supportive theoretical context several alternative possibilities that do not necessarily fit neatly into the theoretical framework presented themselves. Investigating the impact of these alternatives in this case will require further research, but to the extent that they may contribute to theoretical development and inform future discussions they are briefly outlined here.

Detroit-Windsor: A ghost region?

Networks can be tricky things. As Granovetter (1973, 1983) once argued weak ties can be strong. Networks characterized by strong ties – frequent internodal interaction – are much denser but can be more insular as well. Systems lacking weak ties will be fragmented and incoherent. This is also the case with regions – those with only strong networks may be cut off from information and knowledge flows from other places. Where several strong networks exist without many weak ties there might be scarcely any regional network at all. The center of gravity thesis implies that this may be the case in Detroit-Windsor. Many strong networks, isolated from each other by a lack of weak ties, and oriented away from each other by connections to more distant networks may produce the observed weakness of cross-border regional cooperation. However, the opposite could also hold. Maybe there are few strong networks, and only weak ones. In the absence of strong ties weak networks transmit information but their capacity to take action is dispersed. Weak networks are much more difficult to detect without a formal social network analysis. Therefore, this initial research may have missed what might be a proliferation of weak ties across the region, the ghosts of dispersed but potentially vibrant cross-border networks. While the importance of regional networks is frequently discussed in theories of cross-border relationships there is little consensus on precisely how these function and to what effect. Research to clarify the role and relationships of various network types will contribute significantly to understanding the development of cross-border partnerships.
**Civic networks as substitutes**

This paper investigates the dynamics of cross-border relationships between local authorities and concludes that they are very few and characterized by weak institutional integration. The preceding analysis is based on the assumption that the lack of clear interest in collaboration is related to issues of regional identity and political orientation. However, another possibility is that there is little need for intermunicipal cooperation as cross-border coordination is achieved through civic networks. Nelles (2011) finds that regions with dense and broadly connected networks, oriented towards or operating at the regional scale, can sometimes substitute for formal political coordination. Networks of businesses and regional associations can lead regional marketing efforts. Networks of artists, venues, and other stakeholders can come together to manage cultural development and promotion. This alternative scenario is a distant possibility in the Detroit-Windsor case. If they existed, these networks should have been captured in the survey of active regional associations and organizations. However, that networks can functions as substitutes for political cooperation is something that has not been previously considered within this literature.

**The impact of ‘native’ patterns of intermunicipal cooperation**

The dynamics of cross-border relationships between local governments is also be influenced by the respective experiences of those actors on either side of the border. Relationships between municipalities on one side of the border may be quite cooperative with institutionalized partnerships, or those relationships may be antagonistic. Or some municipalities may get on while others do not. Any number of distributions of cooperation and non-cooperation is possible and these will naturally affect the approach of each municipality or regional partnership towards cross-border partnering. The implications of various patterns of ‘native’ intermunicipal cooperation are, as yet, indeterminate. Strong intermunicipal cooperation between municipalities on one side of the border may be indicative of a culture of cooperation that may make partnerships across international borders easy to establish. Or that close partnership may mean that municipalities on one side of the border may feel their interests would be collectively threatened by partnership
with ‘foreign’ actors. Or this strong grouping may not recognize the benefits of cross-border cooperation, as implied by the strong ties thesis. Similarly, fragmented native relationships could theoretically ease cooperation or make it much more difficult to establish. The effect of native patterns on cross-border relationships is doubly indeterminate as these patterns will likely vary in each national context. A further complication is that native partnerships, where they exist, may not necessarily precede cross-border relationships, adding the possibility that partnerships with foreign actors might themselves influence the configuration of native relationships. In Detroit-Windsor native intermunicipal relationships tend to be quite fragmented on both sides of the border – and in the Detroit metropolitan region these relationships might even be characterized as antagonistic – which may potentially explain weak cross-border integration.

**COOPERATION IN CRISIS?**

This paper began with the presumption that the acute economic downturn that affected the automotive industry – and social fabric – that binds the Detroit and Windsor region might catalyze a coordinated response of some kind and be evidence of cross-border dialogue. This expectation was based on the idea that shocks can catalyze radical institutional change. Applied to regionalism a common challenge – such as the restructuring of a core industry – might theoretically produce collective action where none existed before (Nelles 2011). While this crisis is still ongoing there is little evidence of cross-border interaction in the Detroit-Windsor region around any issue related to the decline of the auto industry or subsequent contraction of the regional economy.

This is a bit of a puzzle, as Canadian and American local actors had previously come together quite effectively in response to a much more shocking crisis: 9/11. The border closings in the wake of 9/11 prompted a realization that access to jobs, health care, educational opportunities, recreation and tourism all depended on the free flow of people and goods through the Detroit-Windsor border crossing. The Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce (DRCC) took the initiative and created the bi-national coalition NBEST to address both immediate and long term issues of regional concern related to the border crossing. This partnership included local
mayors as well as a wide coalition of business and public interests. This association has been influential in improving the efficiency of the border while maintaining regional mobility rights in the new security environment. In this instance, the sudden restriction on travel highlighted the importance of maintaining open links between Windsor and Detroit and prompted quick action to re-establish international connections. To date no comparable initiatives have emerged to address the worsening economic decline of the region that has followed the restructuring of the auto industry.

There are two potential explanations. First, the financial crisis and subsequent acceleration of the decline of the auto industry was not as sudden or as shocking as 9/11. In essence, the crisis merely exacerbated a set of problems that had been worsening over several decades. Therefore, the imperative to action may not be as strong as the dramatic closure of the border. Furthermore, while in a sense the crisis has highlighted the common challenges facing communities in the region it has not as dramatically hammered home their interdependence. In this sense the type of crisis, and its potential to demonstrate the close linkages between municipalities in the region, may be important.

A further possibility is that the effect of crisis will depend on the dominant strategies of actors in the region and their capacity to respond effectively. In some instances shocks may prompt local authorities to work together while in others they may exacerbate interlocal competition. A recent study showed that community responses to recession differ based on the configuration of local networks. While this raises some questions about why similar networks have not responded to the financial crisis in the same ways as to the 9/11 border closure in Detroit-Windsor this approach has the potential to illuminate the dynamics of cross-border cooperation in the context of regional shocks.

The potential for crisis to act as a catalyst to cross-border cooperation is poorly understood and rarely discussed in the theoretical literature. In part, this is because crisis is difficult to predict. However, these formative events provide excellent case studies to compare regional responses and cooperative dynamics. Excellent research in this area, by Safford (2009) for instance, in non-bordered contexts might contribute to a better understand of the role of crisis in strengthening or mitigating borders in the cross-border metropolitan context.
DETROIT-WINDSOR: A BROKEN CASE?

A great deal can be learned from cases where little occurs as expected. These provide the opportunity to revisit the sources of those expectations, consider theoretical implications, and produce new insights to explain observations. The Detroit-Windsor region is one such case. Despite what appear to be relatively fertile conditions for cross-border cooperation, very few cross-border partnerships between local authorities have actually bloomed. Nor has the recent advent of a common economic threat produced much in the way of collective action. Despite the open admission of local officials on both sides of the border that cooperation would probably benefit the region, that there are few serious barriers to working together, and that there is currently ample opportunity to open discussion it is unlikely that any such initiatives will emerge. Why? Is this case somehow exceptional? Is the Detroit-Windsor region somehow broken?

Consider the case for exceptionalism. Perhaps we’re dealing with a North American model that is different from European cases. Susan Clarke and others have identified a distinctive configuration of regional cross-border networks in the Cascadia region that had formed from the bottom-up, are more likely to be sector specific and driven by the private sector (Clarke 2001, 2002; Scott 1999). While the weakness of intermunicipal cooperation across the border seems to confirm the typical weakness of public involvement in cross-border networks, the configuration of networks that actually exist does not. Most cross-border initiatives in which local authorities are implicated are driven by senior levels of government. Private-sector or civic networks at the regional scale also appear to be few and far between – at least at the scale of the metropolitan region (Brunet-Jailly 2006). A brief comparison with the Cascadia region reveals more differences than similarities between the cases despite similar institutional and intergovernmental contexts, regional issues and interests, and levels of socio-economic integration.

While this presents Detroit-Windsor as something of a puzzle, I would not contend that the region is exceptional. Theory should allow us to explain observations in
predictable ways. In this case existing theory – or perhaps my interpretation of it – does not satisfactorily account for the patterns of cooperation evident in the Detroit-Windsor region. This paper has suggested some further empirical puzzles as well as some alternative explanations not frequently considered in the existing literature in order to contribute to further theoretical development and debate within this area of study. Ongoing research will investigate the validity of these alternatives in this and other cases. In the meantime, this contribution concludes with a set of questions that should be asked of all cross-border regions: Is what we’re studying really a region? Why? Because perhaps in this case there is no “Detroit-Windsor region” at all, and we are seeing a region where there is perhaps only a border.
References


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