State Trust Land Preservation, Development, and Direct Democracy

Introduction

Why State Trust Land?

In Arizona, state trust land (STL) comprises over 9 million acres of land. Designed as a source of income for public schools, STL is a unique institution which restricts the use of large areas of undeveloped land (Cumina, Quillen). While in trust, these lands are protected from private ownership, but their status is perpetually subject to changes in state legislation. Land that surrounds urban areas, such as Phoenix and Flagstaff, is prime space for development and also serves as home to pristine desert ecosystems. With a booming population and a rapid increase in urban development, STL is a lucrative revenue source. The primary source of revenue from Arizona's STL comes from land for development purposes, both commercial and residential. The principal from development land sales totals seventy-two percent, or $377,670,687, of the total revenues from STL (Lincoln Institute). STL in Arizona is a unique and somewhat obscure policy instrument that dates back nearly a century to Arizona statehood. It provides fertile research ground for scholars interested in urban development, public policy, and the history of the American West.

One dimension of STL that has not yet been explored is the role of citizens in shaping STL policy. STL is a compelling and relatively unexamined area of research for the study of direct democracy and the environment (Souders). As Arizona continues to urbanize, citizens have voiced concerns that the state is selling land that should be used for environmental conservation purposes. These concerns are manifested in a number of citizen's ballot measures that seek to preserve and protect ecosystems on STL. An examination of these recent ballot measures led to a fascinating discovery - Arizona has a rich tradition of direct democracy that intersects with STL, with such ballot measures dating as far back as 1918.

Direct Democracy and STL Analysis

We examine linkages between STL and direct democracy via a text analysis of ballot measures pertaining to STL governance. We analyzed ballot measures from seven states that pertain to state trust land use. These date from 1918 to 2006, with the vast majority (17/23 measures) coming from Arizona. We utilize text analysis to identify and locate major topic codes and used factor analysis to identify crosscutting themes in the ballot measures. The analysis identifies four main dimensions which inform an understanding of STL in light of direct democracy.

Below are data for the ballot measures we collected, topic codes and corresponding frequencies used for text analysis, and the principal component analysis we conducted to determine the main components, or topic groupings, in the STL measures.

A Map of State Trust Land in Arizona and the CAP LTER Site.

*indicates that the code was assigned to at least 20 of the ballot measures.