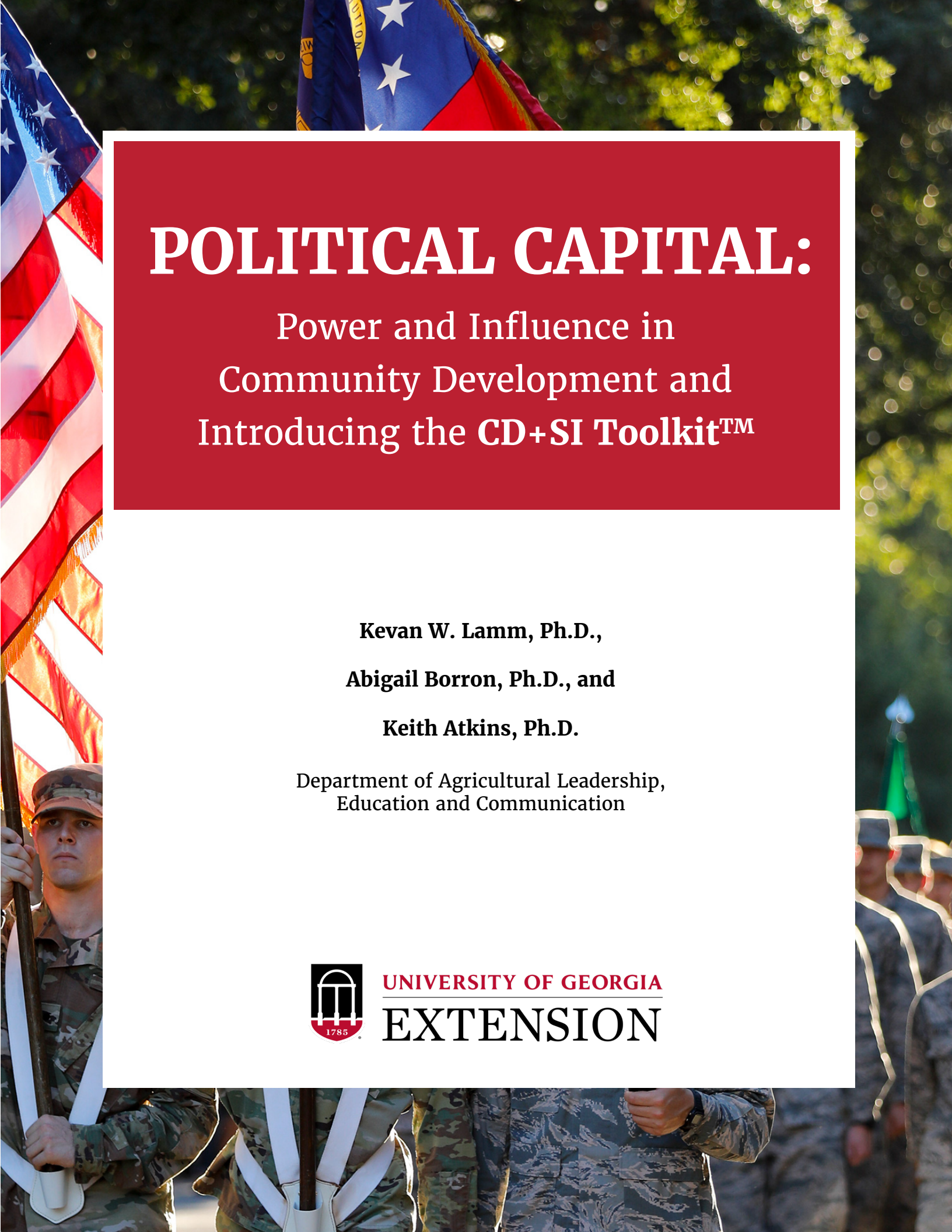




POLITICAL CAPITAL:

Power and Influence in
Community Development and
Introducing the CD+SI Toolkit™

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When we think of political power and influence, we might immediately envision a powerful politician with a great deal of authority to make decisions on behalf of many people. We also might consider a large nonprofit organization (AARP, for example) that advocates for certain policies that benefit its vast membership. In this case, political power and the ability to influence are not derived directly from voters' preferences. Rather, this group's political power is rooted in its large number of members. The size of the organization in terms of members, and the potential number of votes they could cast in any election if motivated by legislative threats to their shared interests, make this type of organization a political force that cannot be ignored. These organizations and their ability to influence public policy demonstrate that there is strength in numbers. This also is true for local communities in Georgia and throughout the United States. It is also the case for smaller community groups concerned with community development policies and programs.



Many Georgia communities must seek outside assistance to obtain the resources needed to aid in community development and generate capital. This particularly is true of smaller communities situated in rural parts of the state. The communities that are successful at securing these resources probably can demonstrate some degree of political power based on community cohesiveness, organization, and motivation. If local leaders, community groups, and other residents are unified by purpose, are well-organized, and are motivated, there is a greater likelihood that they will be successful in finding and obtaining additional resources. Without an organized and concerted effort, a relatively small number of local

officials must compete with larger and more organized groups as they attempt to obtain external resources for community and economic development programs. Simply put, smaller communities with little political power and influence are often unable to obtain the resources they need to initiate and sustain much-needed community development programs. A community's capacity to influence the allocation and availability of resources is called political capital.



The Role of Political Capital in Community Development

Like other forms of capital, political capital can increase communities' productive capacity by helping them and their residents achieve specific goals that would be unattainable without it. Of the various forms of capital found within communities, political capital is perhaps most similar to social capital in that each is built on a foundation of relationships. Political capital, however, might be most evident when there is a difference in status or political influence. One of the most conspicuous examples of this power imbalance among individuals is the relationship between political leaders and their constituents. Perhaps the most consequential relationship in terms of community development exists between local community leaders and outside officials (for example, state representatives and members of Congress) who have the decision-making authority to provide or withhold resources. The extent to which these decisions are influenced by community lobbying is largely determined by the amount of local political capital available to community and group leaders.

Because politics is often associated with government, political capital is sometimes viewed as having relevance only for elected officials, political appointees, and—to some extent—career civil servants. Because of this perception, political capital as it relates to community development is often viewed as the power and leverage that come with political connections, particularly in rural communities where elected officials are expected to determine resource distribution. To a great extent, however, political capital refers to the power and influence of communities and groups that are organized around strong relationships and associations. These groups may have few obvious political connections,



but they possess a considerable amount of political capital because of their collective voice, coordinated efforts, and consolidated community development preferences. Within a community development context, the political capital linked to a group or community is an indication of empowerment. An empowered community should better be able to help determine what objectives are important and what methods are most appropriate to achieving those goals.

Using the CD+SI Toolkit™ to Measure Community Perceptions of Political Capital

As political capital is the link between community development, government aid and support, and private sector investment in a community-driven program or project, it may be necessary for local leaders, groups, and other residents to determine how political capital is perceived within their community. Evaluating community perceptions of political capital may provide important insights regarding the effectiveness and acceptance of community and economic development programs. If local leaders and community development professionals have an opportunity to consider positive and negative perceptions of several elements of political capital, they may be able to better tailor development projects to address the aspects of a project that are perceived negatively. These insights also should help improve understanding of which existing programs are perceived positively and therefore can attempt to replicate or repurpose them to address different challenges. For instance, if residents perceive that local leaders are attentive to the concerns of community groups, the approach that facilitates this communication could be modified and used to establish relationships with traditionally underserved groups within the community.

The Community Diagnostics + Social Impact (CD+SI) Toolkit™ is developed to provide a quantitative measure of perceived political capital. To obtain community perceptions of political capital, residents are invited to provide their perceptions and indicate their level of agreement, or disagreement, with statements concerning local leadership and community groups and their ability to bring about change. The measure specifically focuses on perceptions of whether (1) non-elected leaders work to effect change, (2) non-elected leaders listen to community groups, (3) political leaders work to effect change, (4) political leaders listen to community groups, and (5) groups can mobilize resources for community change.

Although political capital may have different connotations for different groups and individuals, it's very important to recognize and measure this form of capital. Political capital provides an opportunity for communities to assess how empowered community members are to affect change.

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