

URBAN POLITICS

A Reader

Stephen J. McGovern

Editor



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Haverford College



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PREFACE

A number of themes permeate *Urban Politics: A Reader*. First, it is organized on a historical basis. Utilizing a narrative approach has the advantage of making intuitive sense to students who readily grasp the story of the rise, fall, and possible resurrection of U.S. cities. Moreover, proceeding chronologically facilitates learning because to understand how urban politics works now, it is essential for students to know what has happened in the past. Second, this reader highlights the crucial role of societal change in engendering political change within cities. Accordingly, considerable attention is devoted to how industrialization, internal migration, immigration, racial and ethnic transition, deindustrialization, suburbanization, and globalization have affected urban politics. Third, although the influence of broad societal forces is elaborated at length, this reader also strives to illuminate how people—both at an elite level and at the grassroots—make a difference in how a polity is governed; in short, structure and agency matter in elucidating local governance. Fourth, in teaching urban politics I have always tried to expose students to multiple voices with respect to race and ethnicity, class, culture, and ideology. A thorough encounter with the rich variety of perspectives that make up the urban mosaic is necessary for comprehending who wields power and why. A consequence of employing the same approach here is that this book contains more readings than other urban politics readers (but a similar number in comparison to many other readers in urban studies and American politics). My hope is that the depth and breadth of this reader will engage students and stimulate lively discussion and debate.

As for the format of the book, each chapter begins with an essay that provides historical, conceptual, and theoretical context for the readings to follow. Although relatively short, these introductory essays cover a lot of substantive ground while offering guidance for further reading for those who wish to pursue more specialized areas of inquiry.

The selected readings naturally represent the core of the book. They include reflections from familiar and colorful luminaries of the world of urban politics like George Washington Plunkitt, Andrew Dickson White, and Jacob Riis, as well as time-tested analyses from long-respected scholars such as Sam Bass Warner, Robert Merton, Samuel Hays, Michael Katz, Kenneth Jackson, Jon Teaford, Carl Abbott, and Clarence Stone. I have also turned to many scholars from the current generation of urbanists whose path-breaking work has been published in the leading university presses and top journals, including Guian McKee, Jason Hackworth,

Andra Gillespie, Tracy Neumann, Paul O'Hara, Joel Rast, Audrey Singer, Domenic Vitiello, and Thad Williamson. In addition to scholars, there are readings by journalists (Alan Ehrenhalt, Jonathan Kozol, and Karen Paget), activists (Stokely Carmichael, Bayard Rustin, and Saul Alinsky), and politicians (the former mayor of Indianapolis, Stephen Goldsmith). Furthermore, the readings offer a look at a wide array of places that vary by size, demographic composition, and geography. Along with the larger urban centers that tend to garner considerable attention from scholars—New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles—this collection shines an analytical light on understudied cities such as Indianapolis, San Antonio, Portland, Richmond, Gary, and Camden.

After each set of readings on a particular topic, I have added material on the implications for public policy associated with the time period covered and the contemporary era. The Policy Then/Policy Now sections are designed to give students an opportunity to consider more practically how and why urban politics matters to people in their day-to-day lives, often in momentous ways. Each chapter concludes with a list of additional resources and discussion questions. The ultimate goals are to expand students' knowledge of power and politics in American cities, sharpen critical thinking skills, and cultivate a love of learning about urban affairs and a lifelong concern for the vitality and well-being of cities.

Acknowledgments

Many people deserve my sincere gratitude for enabling me to bring this project to fruition. The structure and content of *Urban Politics: A Reader* is in no small measure a product of my teaching experiences during the past two decades, mostly at Haverford College. I am deeply indebted to my students for providing a true partnership in the process of learning about politics in American cities and helping me to think about how and why power dynamics evolve over time. Their insights and feedback have shaped this book in profound ways.

More specifically, urban politics was the first class I taught when I started my career as a visiting assistant professor at Temple University, and many of my core ideas about how to frame the course can be traced to that initial effort. A colleague at the time suggested that I might use my syllabus as the basis for a book, and so the seed was planted very early on. My students at Temple helped me make constructive revisions, and I am particularly grateful to Susan Clampet-Lundquist, Cameron Voss, Marshall King, and Neil Donahue for their encouragement and support; I have not forgotten.

I have had the great pleasure of spending the bulk of my career at Haverford College where I have taught urban politics and related courses for the past sixteen years. There are far too many students to mention by name, but I cannot thank them enough for making classroom experiences there so stimulating, challenging, and rewarding. At a time when institutions of higher learning are under attack, and sometimes for valid reasons, Haverford's commitment to excellence in scholarship and teaching stands as an exemplar of how to do it right. I am also deeply appreciative to the many folks at Haverford who have provided important research, administrative, and technical support, including Margaret Schaus,

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Many thanks to SAGE for inviting me to submit a prospectus and then giving me the opportunity to realize a plan that had been percolating for many years. Thanks, in particular, to the anonymous reviewers and to Sarah Calabi, Suzanne Flinchbaugh, Katie Lowry, Sheri Gilbert, Raquel Christie, Tracy Buyan, Rajasree Ghosh, Nancy Matuszak, Matt Byrnie, and especially Elise Frasier. Putting together a reader is a far more complicated job than I had ever anticipated, so I am sincerely grateful to Elise for guiding me through the maze with such intelligence, patience, sensitivity to everyone's preferences, and good humor.

Closer to home, thank you to my two wonderful kids, Jack and Maria, for never complaining when I seemingly disappeared for hours (days?) at a time to work on the book and for bringing so much laughter and joy into our home. I'm so proud of both of you. And finally, none of this would have been possible but for the love, generosity, understanding, and unwavering intellectual and emotional support from my partner in all things, Lisa.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Stephen J. McGovern is an associate professor in the Political Science Department at Haverford College. He is the author of *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.*, and is the coauthor with Charles C. Euchner of *Urban Policy Reconsidered: Dialogues on the Problems and Prospects of American Cities*. He has also published numerous articles in journals such as *Urban Affairs Review*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Journal of Urban History*, *Housing Policy Debate*, *Journal of Planning History*, and *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. He earned a Ph.D. in Government from Cornell University and a J.D. from New York University School of Law.

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Chapter 1

Cities in a Global Era

Introduction

In a book about power and politics in American cities, it is appropriate to ask at the very outset whether cities are relevant in an age of globalization. And even if cities do fulfill a significant function in the transnational flow of capital, labor, and goods, how important is political decision making at the local level? When key actors in the global economy sometimes seem to operate above nation-states in an autonomous and even unaccountable manner, do ordinary citizens living and working in cities have much influence over the big issues that shape their lives? Put simply, does urban politics still matter?

While sweeping societal change would at first blush seem to undermine the place of cities as economic and political entities in the global era, many scholars have contended just the opposite. Saskia Sassen notes the paradox that notwithstanding the worldwide dispersal of economic activities, there has been a simultaneous concentration of economic activities in cities, which have become strategic nodes in the implementation and maintenance of the global economy. In her view, cities are the spatial hub of leading economic sectors such as finance and specialized services for firms. Moreover, they continue to be the primary site of production processes, organizational arrangements, and physical infrastructures. Sassen claims that it is no coincidence that with the rapid growth of the globalized knowledge economy based on information, technology, and innovation, we have seen the marked expansion of cities throughout the world.¹

However, urbanists agree that globalization has had varying impacts on American cities. In **Reading 1-1**, Richard C. Longworth provides a typology of cities based on their capacity to connect to the global economy. At the top of the hierarchy are the so-called global cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, which are major centers of business and finance, technology, culture, and power and thus are directly linked to global networks trading in capital, information, and expertise. A second tier of cities is somewhat less tied to the world economy, but places like Indianapolis, Denver, and Portland continue to serve as thriving regional centers. All these cities lure newcomers searching for good jobs and economic opportunity. A third tier consists of former industrial dynamos such as Detroit and Akron that lack both strong links to the global economy and regional stature; their future prospects are uncertain at best.²

Other commentators believe that changes in society threaten the long-term vitality of all but the most prosperous cities. They point to the revolution in digital communications and how it has transformed how we think about space, community, and urban life. The Internet makes it possible for individuals, groups, and firms to conduct their affairs from virtually anywhere, rendering the age-old need for people to cluster together in urban places much less compelling.³ But perceptive observers such as Joel Kotkin contend that the digital era may actually be a boon for cities. He argues that while individuals and businesses are increasingly able to settle wherever they wish, their locational decisions hinge more than ever on the particular amenities of any given area. Ironically, “the more technology frees us from the tyranny of place and past affiliation, the greater the need for individual places to make themselves more attractive.” As city leaders endeavor to enhance their appeal to mobile citizens and firms, at least some urban places (and Kotkin refers to a wide variety of such places, not just large cities) can be expected to grow and thrive.⁴

Indeed, some cities in the United States are now growing and flourishing—for the first time in many decades. After nearly a century of declining populations, a trend that seriously undermined the economic, social, and cultural condition of urban America, demographers report that the populations of many cities have stabilized while some have experienced a small but significant increase.⁵ The recent influx of middle-class people with resources and skills, including young college graduates, empty nesters, and immigrants, has revitalized neighborhoods and boosted the overall prospects of cities. At the same time, African Americans and immigrants have been moving at higher rates to the suburbs. Alan Ehrenhalt calls these recent demographic shifts “The Great Inversion,” and he considers their implications in **Reading 1-2**.

Why have many American cities undergone a resurgence after several decades of decline? One explanation is that some cities have benefited by offering an attractive urban lifestyle. Richard Florida has influenced numerous city planners by emphasizing the practical advantages of implementing policies designed to nurture a lively social environment and a culture that promotes diversity, tolerance, and cosmopolitanism. Such a milieu, Florida maintains, entices a “creative class” of well-educated and highly skilled individuals whose collective presence within urban neighborhoods and business districts serves as an incubator of ideas, innovation, and productivity.⁶ Cities that have cultivated such environments—Boston, Seattle, and Austin, Texas, to name just a few—have witnessed healthy population spikes and vigorous economic growth.⁷

However, it would be highly misleading to proclaim any kind of broad-based urban renaissance throughout the United States. First, many cities have not experienced a revival. Some cities have been unable to connect to the global economy or develop robust sociocultural spheres that might attract middle-class newcomers. Such places continue to suffer desperate levels of unemployment and poverty.⁸ Second, even among those cities with noticeable gains, the fruits of growth have been uneven. While some sectors of the population have prospered, others have been left behind. Inequality has become one of the defining characteristics of American cities, as elaborated by Alan Mallach in **Reading 1-3**.⁹

What is to be done? Cities continue to be the focal point of many of the nation’s most intractable problems. Along with the deepening chasm between the affluent and the poor, urbanites confront racial and ethnic tensions; underfunded and underperforming public schools; a dearth of decent, affordable housing; and the stubborn persistence of gangs, drugs, and violent streets. Responding effectively to such issues is the challenge of urban governance. But are the problems too immense for cities to make real headway, especially in the global era? Or are cities uniquely positioned to make significant contributions? After all, citizens are closest to government at the local level and thus have the best opportunity to get directly involved in the political process and shape public policy. The potential for democratic engagement is arguably greatest within the nation’s towns and cities. But what factors work against an energetic and active citizenry? And even assuming an engaged public, what forces limit the capacity of city governments to act productively?

This book explores these fundamental issues of urban politics. A core assumption is that much can be learned from the past, and so we begin our analysis by examining how cities were governed at the birth of the United States and then proceed chronologically. In the process, we will discover how cities have evolved over time and how citizens and their leaders have utilized political power to try and improve their societies. Many approaches to urban governance have been employed with varying degrees of success. For our purposes, the “visions of politics” that have emerged at different times and places provide valuable lessons for the contemporary period. By the end of this narrative, we hope that you will have developed the knowledge and skills to judge for yourself how cities today might go about pursuing a brighter future.

Notes

1. Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2012); Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

2. For another ranking of global cities, see “Global Cities, Present and Future: 2014 Global Cities Index and Emerging Cities Outlook.” A.T. Kearney. www.atkearney.com/research-studies/global-cities-index (Accessed February 28, 2015).
3. Refer to William Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).
4. Joel Kotkin, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution Is Reshaping the American Landscape* (New York: Random House, 2000); see also Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).
5. William H. Frey, “Will This Be the Decade of Big City Growth?” www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/05/23, May 23, 2014 (Accessed February 28, 2015).
6. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); see also Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Random House, 1969). For a critique of Florida, see Jamie Peck, “Struggling with the Creative Class,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Affairs*, 29 (4), 2005.
7. In explaining the appeal of some reviving cities to the creative class, other urbanists emphasize not so much the recent policy initiatives influenced by Richard Florida but the long-term evolution of economic development and growth management strategies that shaped a city's cultural economy. Carl Grodach, “Before and After the Creative City: The Politics of Cultural Policy in Austin, Texas,” *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 34 (1), 2012. Another study, in an even sharper departure from Florida, points to high levels of social capital to account for the rising fortunes of a rustbelt city. Meghan Ashlin Rich, “‘From Coal to Cool’: The Creative Class, Social Capital, and the Revitalization of Scranton,” *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 35 (3), 2013.
8. Refer to Charlie LeDuff, *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013); Sandra L. Barnes, *The Cost of Being Poor: A Comparative Study of Life in Poor Urban Neighborhoods in Gary, Indiana* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
9. See also Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge, eds., *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2005).