

The Crisis of Growth Politics

Cleveland, Kucinich, and the Challenge of Urban Populism

Todd Swanstrom



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*This is the first great thing to be kept in
mind—that the battle is not against persons,
but against unnatural conditions, against a
wrong social order!*

Tom Johnson
Mayor of Cleveland (1901–1909)

**To Jessica
For a Better Future**

Preface

Scholarly works are rarely written because some disinterested academic decides that a topic requires analysis. The reasons are usually much more pragmatic, more pressing.

In winter 1978–1979, I was living in New York City. My status was, as they say, ABD (All But Dissertation). Having passed the qualifying exams to write a Ph.D. dissertation in politics at Princeton University in 1975, I had been groping about ever since to find a suitable topic. Beginning to despair of ever getting my degree, one day I ran into an old friend from Princeton, who suggested that we collaborate on an article about urban politics. I agreed. It soon became clear that we were both intrigued by a young politician from Cleveland who was just beginning to get national media attention. At that time, Dennis Kucinich (pronounced Koo-SIN-itch) had been mayor for only a year, but he had already survived a narrow recall election and engaged in a noisy confrontation with Cleveland banks over the city's default. *Enfant terrible*, the media labeled him, Dennis the Menace, scourge of the Establishment and ruin of Cleveland. My friend and I were skeptical. Some of the sins Kucinich was charged with—killing special tax subsidies for big business and fighting to keep the city-owned electrical utility—seemed more like virtues to us. We decided to look into the matter.

The resulting article, “A Tale of Two Cities” (*Nation*, March 24, 1979), compared Kucinich to New York's Mayor Koch—to the detriment of the latter. I look back on the article now with mixed feelings. Never having visited Cleveland, our treatment of Kucinich's political movement was necessarily shallow. We painted him in rosy colors as an unambiguous defender of democracy. Later, close-up, I saw that his commitment to democratic values was far more spotted than it appeared from afar. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that our positive assessment of Kucinich's economic stands, in contrast to Koch's, was fundamentally correct. Unlike Koch, Kucinich opposed using special tax subsidies to attract corporate investment in downtown office buildings and fought to prevent Cleveland's public sector, albeit much

smaller than New York's, from shrinking further by refusing to sell the municipal light plant to the area's private utility.

It soon dawned on me that here was a suitable topic for my dissertation. I rushed off a letter to Mayor Kucinich in May 1979 asking for a job in his administration so that I could see things firsthand. A few days later I got a phone call from Bob Weissman, Kucinich's right-hand man, offering me a position. My wife's jaw dropped as I immediately accepted. (Lesson 1: always tell your wife when you apply for a job in Cleveland, especially if you don't live there at the time.)

When I arrived in Cleveland in May 1979, the Kucinich administration was in a state of siege. Public opinion was polarized to a degree rarely seen in American politics. I did not consider myself naïve, yet I remained shocked for months by the local media's biased attacks on Kucinich. The two daily newspapers painted the administration, inaccurately, as in a state of utter chaos and collapse. Every calamity that befell Cleveland was blamed on Kucinich. Strangely enough, Kucinich and his top aides seemed to thrive on this siege atmosphere. The second day I was in Cleveland, Weissman tossed a copy of the evening paper across his city hall desk at me. "Read this," he said, pointing to one article. The headlines read: "Least popular of politicians is Weissman." I was nonplussed. Weissman only smiled. In fact, the Kucinich administration contributed to the polarization of opinion by treating anyone who wasn't 100 percent with them as an enemy. "Confrontation politics," Weissman called it, and it was the key to their electoral success, he said.

A few months after arriving in Cleveland, I began working in the Kucinich campaign organization in the evenings and on weekends. It was an extraordinary operation, part machine, part crusade. Composed almost entirely of patronage city workers, it was small, with only 150 out of about 10,000 city employees participating. There were no geographically based ward leaders or precinct captains. Everybody did the same thing: door-to-door canvassing with leaflets. It was less a machine and more an alternative media, a direct and personal means of communication between Kucinich and the voters. While remarkably efficient, the Kucinich organization was hardly democratic; it was run in a top-down fashion with almost no effort to discuss issues. Countless hours spent walking through Cleveland's neighborhoods and knocking on doors, however, gave me invaluable insight into Kucinich's grassroots support—and opposition.

My first job in city government was with the CETA federal jobs

training and employment program. After a few months, I transferred to the Department of Community Development, the city's most political department, which administered the federal Community Development Block Grant. I worked there as a program evaluator through the last few months of the Kucinich administration and stayed on through most of the first term of Kucinich's successor, George Voinovich, as a neighborhood planner and policy analyst. My work did not let me observe the inner sanctums of the mayor's office, but it did allow me to view firsthand the effect of Kucinich's urban populism on the employees and programs of city government.

I was impressed with the efficiency of the Kucinich campaign, but I was not impressed with the efficiency of city government. So much energy was focused on the reelection effort that some of us jokingly referred to the administration as a campaign organization that, unfortunately, had to run a government in its spare time. I was also disappointed to learn that few Kucinich activists had anything in the way of political ideology. Their attachment was not to urban populism but to "Dennis." (Everyone in Cleveland called the mayor by his first name; for supporters it was a term of endearment, for opponents a term of derision.) Most Kucinich appointees were young, intelligent, well-intentioned, scrupulously honest, and utterly without experience or expertise in government.

There was little positive policy direction during Kucinich's hectic two-year term. The most visible issues were negative: stop the sale of Muny Light, end tax abatements for downtown. The day-to-day operations of city government remained pretty much the same as they had been before. The main difference was a sincere effort to stop corruption and a "get tough" management style that attempted to cut costs at every corner. Notwithstanding the inertia of city government, the hostility of the economic dominants—the large banks and corporations—was unremitting. It reached the point, according to Kucinich, that the banks pushed the city into default for "political" reasons—to punish Kucinich for attacking big business and refusing to sell Muny Light to the private utility. (The question of whether default was political is taken up in Chapter 7.)

The central issue raised by Kucinich's experiment in urban populism, I soon realized, was the extent of power exerted by large corporations, not through traditional lobbying techniques but through their control over investment. Many of us began to wonder: what would happen if a populist government actually went on the offensive, ex-

pandering Munny Light and buying up its private competitor or imposing steep taxes on speculative gains in downtown real estate? How much room is there for reform? We soon saw that this question could not be separated from an analysis of internal political factors—the electoral system, the structure of city government, and the role of interest groups. It was on this set of issues, what I call “growth politics,” that I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation, finally completed in May 1981. This book is a revised version.

I would like to acknowledge the help of two friends, Bob Kerstein and Steve Esquith, who read and criticized early drafts, only dimly related to this manuscript. Without their encouragement the entire project might never have gotten off the ground. Ron Berkman also gave me a crucial early push. Little did we know where our modest effort would lead. Members of a study group in New York City (Audrey, Mary Jo, Bob, Neil, Marc, John, Karen, Fran, and Sarah) motivated me to study things political at an otherwise discouraging time.

I would like to thank the Kucinich administration for giving me the chance to experience a great, if flawed, adventure. I would like to thank the Voinovich administration for not firing me because I was a Kucinich appointee. Two distinguished professors at Princeton, Sheldon Wolin and Duane Lockard, showed unusual forbearance in taking on a long-lost graduate student. Their wise criticisms and encouragement were invaluable. The following individuals read all or parts of the manuscript and provided valuable responses: Dick Butsch, Sandy Buchanan, Michael Danielson, Susan Fainstein, Craig Glazer, Ed Kelly, John Logan, Bruce Miroff, Harvey Molotch, Paul Ryder, Bill Tabb, Bill Whitney, John Wilbur, Jerry Webman, Jay Westbrook, and Sharon Zukin. Jennifer French, my production editor at Temple, worked tirelessly to deal with the myriad details of bringing the project to completion. Finally, Murdoch Matthew, my copyeditor, deserves thanks for mercilessly eliminating the academic pretensions in my writing style.

Many people in Cleveland, too many to mention, have my gratitude for guiding me through the labyrinthine pathways of Cleveland politics. Two, however, deserve special recognition. Everyone reads, but few acknowledge, Roldo Bartimole's *Point of View*, a one man muckraking operation that has a virtual monopoly on tweaking the noses of Cleveland's establishment. Past issues, going all the way back to 1968, gave me a rare glimpse into the hidden history of Cleveland politics. Norm

Krumholz, former director of Cleveland's City Planning Commission, is better known nationwide, as a founder of equity planning, than he is in his hometown. Nevertheless, Krumholz, and his protégés at the City Planning Commission, produced a series of reports on Cleveland as notable for their clarity and forthrightness as for their unswerving advocacy of neighborhood interests. They were a prime source of analysis and information for me.

I would also like to thank John Cosari for generously allowing me to use his considerable collection of clippings on Kucinich and Cleveland politics. A number of people agreed to be interviewed or supplied clippings and documents. I cannot thank them all here, but I greatly appreciate their efforts.

Thanks, as well, to Ruth Harris, Addie Napolitano, Maxine Morman, and Suzanne Hagen, for fairly flawless typing.

Last, but not least, I wish to thank Mary Jo Long, without whose help the whole project would have been impossible.

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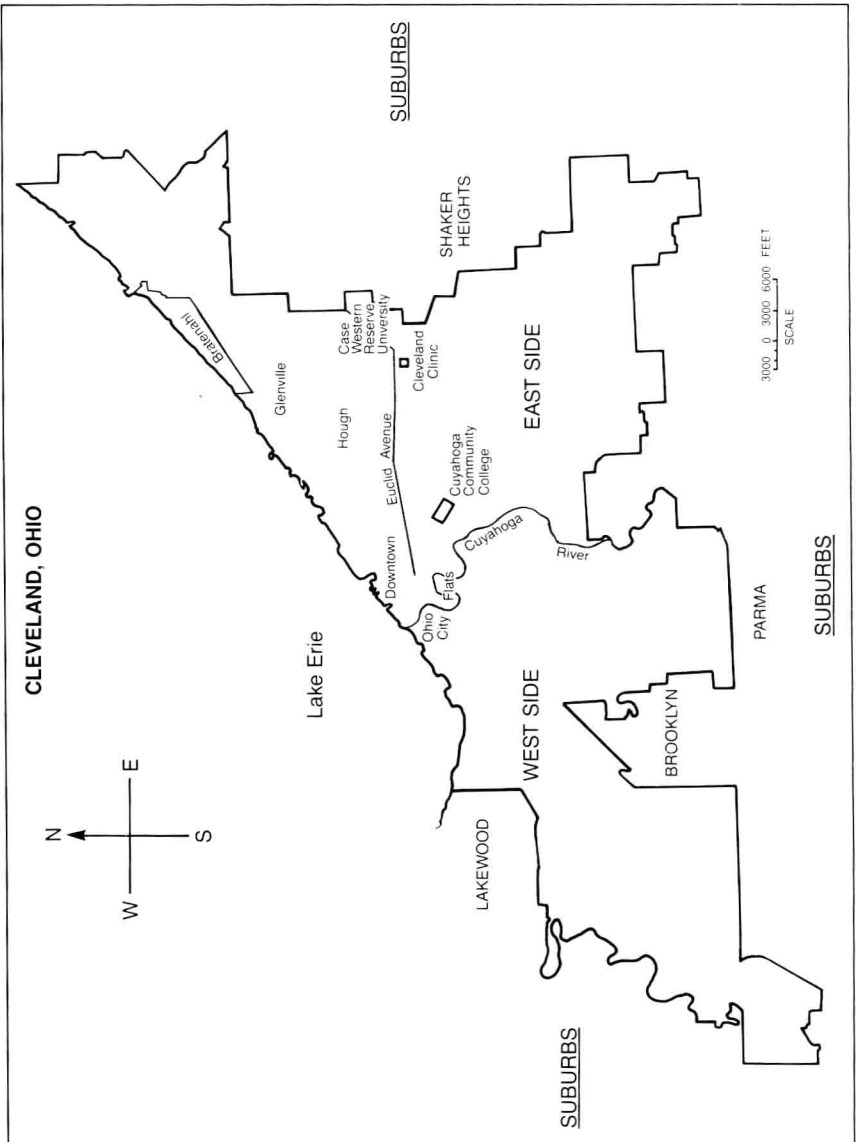
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Introduction

Those are the rules and I'm going by the goddamn rules. This suicidal outthrust competition among the states has got to stop but until it does, I mean to compete. It's too bad we have a system where dog eats dog and the devil takes the hindmost. But I'm tired of taking the hindmost.¹

*Coleman Young
Mayor of Detroit*

In his younger days Coleman Young, Detroit's first black mayor, was a labor organizer and Marxist radical, blacklisted by the auto companies and the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union for his communist leanings. After he was elected mayor in 1973, however, Young became better known for giving generous incentives to large corporations to invest in Detroit. Young has supported extensive tax abatements for downtown development, including his pride and joy: the \$350 million Renaissance Center. Recently, Detroit used its powers of eminent domain to clear 465 acres of a working class neighborhood, Poletown, to make way for a new General Motors Cadillac plant. When all is finished, the loans, grants, federal monies, and tax incentives that the city will pour into this project will total about \$300 million. As the quotation above illustrates, Young justifies these subsidies to big business on the ground that mayors simply have no choice but to enter the investment competition between cities and states; it's compete or die. This "logic" of growth politics is what I propose to examine in this book.

Varieties of Growth Politics

Growth politics can be defined, simply, as the effort by governments to enhance the economic attractiveness of their locality, to increase the intensity of land use by enticing mobile wealth to enter their