

Edited by David R. Johnson, John A. Booth, & Richard J. Harris

The Politics of San Antonio

Community, Progress, & Power



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Preface

Community, Progress, and Power in San Antonio

Our purpose in this volume is to demonstrate how the ideas of community, progress, and power have contributed to the growth of San Antonio. Different versions and applications of each idea have contributed to San Antonio's development since 1836. At each stage of the city's growth various groups, but most especially local social and economic elites, have used political power to implement their version of San Antonio's future.¹ San Antonio's public policy makers have usually operated within a set of ideological constraints that, with little public consent, maximized governmental support of the local economic elite's interests. This tradition began with the first political machine organized by Bryan Callaghan II (1885–99). Callaghan, a prime mover in San Antonio's first period of major growth and development, pursued public policies that strongly favored local businesses. Later, from 1914 to roughly 1925, a "reform" government drawn largely from the city's economic elite vigorously expanded public works. Their goal was to reestablish subsidies for city services (street paving, street lighting, and the like) whose costs had previously been borne by private developers. A third era of heavy city government subsidy for private business interests occurred between 1955 and 1975, when the Good Government League (GGL) ruled San Antonio. City councils dominated by the GGL made policy within a set of guidelines established by the GGL leadership.²

The degree of elite economic and political control, however, has varied cyclically since the nineteenth century. In 1885–99, 1914–25, and 1955–75 the city's socioeconomic elites dominated much of what went on in both the economic and political arenas. But during the periods 1899–1912, 1925–52, and since 1975, disunity among the socioeconomic elites, demographic

changes in the city's electorate, changes in the national economy, and other factors have led to a greater dispersion of power. In these periods, key political decisions rested in somewhat different hands from those of major economic decisions (see Chapters 1, 5, 8, and 10). Indeed, many of the city's major political conflicts have pitted the city's economic elite against middle-class and lower-middle-class people who had achieved political power and who had different conceptions of community and progress. From 1905 to 1914, political decisions rested in the hands of a lower-middle-class political machine. The 1912–14 commission government reform movement represented the socioeconomic elites' effort to reassert their views. Between 1925 and 1952, a middle-class political machine controlled city and county government in San Antonio. The contemporary power struggle in San Antonio is more complex than earlier struggles, but remains a contest over the concentration of economic and political influence. The demise of the GGL in 1975 and the shift to a district-based city council system in 1977 dispersed political and economic power, with a certain amount of political decision making slipping away from the now divided economic elites to a variety of other groups. This decline of the economic elites' twenty-year political hegemony has brought a strong challenge to its economic decision-making power as well. A shifting coalition led by Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS)—a lower- and lower-middle-class, largely Mexican-American community improvement pressure group—has attempted, with some success, to place major economic development and growth policies on the public agenda.

Regardless of their differences, all the groups that have sought or exercised power in San Antonio share a commitment to progress, a vague but powerful ideological concept that implies a universally beneficial developmental process. For San Antonians, as for boosters elsewhere, progress has meant population growth, better public services, and economic development. Each of these interrelated elements has critical implications for capitalists. Growth of population expands the size of local markets, increasing the potential profitability for local business and demands for new services. Expansion of the public service network represents a critical element for attracting and holding new population, thereby indirectly subsidizing local business interests. Furthermore, public services provide a direct subsidy to certain businesses, especially real estate developers, by lowering the cost of their product. Third, economic development (defined as increasing the per capita investment in the local economy, increasing per capita income, and expanding the city's economic hinterland) provides a magnet for further population growth and still greater opportunities for local capital. All in all,

then, there are ample reasons why San Antonio's economic elites have historically intervened so vigorously in the political arena in the name of "progress."

The pursuit of progress is one thing; its distribution is another. The power to distribute the benefits of progress has rested in a relatively small number of hands. During the periods when economic and political power have been most concentrated, the benefits of the city's progress have gone disproportionately to the elites. Thus, during the GGL's dominance, public service spending was largely directed toward subsidizing suburban development on the north and west sides of San Antonio, where middle- and upper-class immigrants attracted by expanding businesses, schools, and medical facilities were settling. Simultaneously, however, the GGL councils directed capital expenditures away from older, poorer areas where services were deteriorating under the pressures of dealing with the increasing flow of poor Spanish-speaking migrants (see Chapter 9). In the long run, such discrimination in the distribution of progress has had important repercussions for community in San Antonio.

Several major ethnocultural and racial communities make up San Antonio's population. The major (though not all) ethnic, cultural, and racial groups have vertical social groupings, cutting across class lines and internally united by shared cultural, religious, and linguistic traits.³ *Mexicanos*, Spanish speakers with roots in the Spanish colonial system and independent Mexico, were among San Antonio's major nineteenth-century ethnic/racial groups. Anglo-Saxons (English, Irish, Scots), usually from the southern U.S. states, began migrating to the city in the 1820s and became a flood by the late nineteenth century. Black slaves came with the Anglo-Saxons, establishing the nucleus of a small but important population in San Antonio. French settlers were a significant element especially during the early 1800s, but they were gradually overwhelmed numerically by other nationality groups. Germans initially arrived in San Antonio during the 1840s and, along with the Mexican Americans and the Anglo-Saxons, eventually became one of the three major cultural groups. Other elements—Chinese, Italians, Greeks, and Poles, to name but a few—came as well, but in lesser numbers.

These communities have not remained stable in proportion to one another. The *Mexicanos*, a majority in the early nineteenth century, were roughly equalled in numbers by both Germans and Anglos in the late nineteenth century owing to heavy immigration by the latter two. But beginning in the mid-twentieth century, increasing Mexican-American immigration and higher birthrates enabled this ethnic group to achieve major-

ity status again by the mid-1970s. During the twentieth century many of the cultural and linguistic barriers among the groups of northern European origin diminished as Germans, Czechs, Poles, and Italians began to assimilate into the dominant English-language culture. The process, though still far from complete, has proceeded to the degree that the term "Anglo" in the area's vernacular now refers to almost anyone neither Chicano nor black. In fact, in the political arena, one might well argue that this "Anglo" or "white" element is emerging as a new community in and of itself. Despite such trends, many of the original ethnic communities persist and receive nurture through organized religious and cultural celebrations which perpetuate their groups' traditions.

Although ethnic, cultural, and racial communities cut across class lines in San Antonio, the city's ethnocultural communities do not share equally in wealth, status, and power. One dramatic demonstration of this comes from comparing U.S. census education and income data on blacks, Hispanics, and whites in the San Antonio area.⁴ The median income and educational attainment for Hispanics and blacks are far below those for whites. Equally interesting is the disparity between Hispanics and blacks. While the blacks in both 1970 and 1980 were more educated than San Antonio Hispanics, their median income level was less. A San Antonian's ethnocultural background or language substantially influences his chances for political, economic, educational, and occupational success (see Chapters 3, 4, and 7). From the statistics, or from even a cursory glance at the everyday reality confronted by San Antonio's diverse communities, any observer can see that the Chicano majority and the black minority live in much less advantageous situations than the Anglo minority. Much of this disparity stems from long-standing discrimination by economic and political decision makers.⁵

"Community" also involves San Antonians' identification with their place of residence and with each other. This includes several nuances—affection for the city, mutual respect among its citizens, a sense of shared destiny, and so forth. This type of community might be best described in terms of people getting along with each other. San Antonians often congratulate themselves on the city's harmony and its lack of conflict. Indeed, over much of its recent history the city has been remarkably quiescent in comparison with other U.S. cities, many riven by overt racial, class, and political conflicts. However, we believe that much of what San Antonians have interpreted as community has in fact been an enforced quietude that masks many pronounced tensions.

We thus argue that it would be a great mistake to interpret such con-

trolled calm as evidence of this second type of community among San Antonians. Indeed, in recent years, the city has experienced increased conflict as established mechanisms of political and economic control have deteriorated. When in the early 1970s the ruling elites of San Antonio, incarnate in the Good Government League, lost their internal cohesion and eventually fell from power, the consequent power vacuum permitted a series of strong challenges to the established political elite, as well as to extant political and economic development policies. These challenges came from several new organizations embodying the dissatisfaction of many previously silent, but obviously discontented groups. Perhaps no organization better exemplifies this trend than Communities Organized for Public Service. COPS was born of the frustration of a group of Mexican-American home owners with poor services, and by employing a variety of tactics to gain access to the public agenda COPS has won a series of important policy victories (see Chapter 9). Elements of the declining old political elite have attacked COPS as radical and as a threat to social peace and competence in government. This attack has further politicized the differences between Mexican Americans and Anglos, threatening the city with further interethnic polarization and hostility.

San Antonio is thus a city once again in the midst of major political, social, and economic changes. The key to solving crucial problems in the community's future development lies in the formation of a new political consensus which can, for the first time, distribute power among competing groups, so that progress will not come, as it has too often in the past, at the expense of community.

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Chapter One

Power and Progress in San Antonio Politics, 1836–1970

The people of American cities, San Antonians among them, have always regarded growth as the key to prosperity. Growth of population and economic activity have been synonymous with prosperity. Because of competition for population and economic resources, city dwellers have not assumed that growth was inevitable. Urban boosters have equated a marginal population increase, or economic difficulties, with failure and even death.¹ Indeed, urban development in the United States has been quite uneven. From the frenetic city-building era of the nineteenth century to the present there have been many examples of stagnation and of outright failure. Recent theories of urban development argue that transformations of the national capitalist economy are largely responsible for the problems and opportunities of every city. Nationwide economic changes have had “profound effects upon the relative prosperity and rates of growth in different metropolitan areas.”² Shifting patterns of capital accumulation and the resulting rise and decline of productive specialties, the evolution of labor relations, and changing regional terms of trade have shaped American urban development for two centuries.³

But within these constraints, local elites have shaped the fate of specific cities. In order to promote growth, local leaders have sought to attract new population and stimulate urban development. Broadly construed, development took two forms. The first involved economic initiatives to give one city a competitive advantage over its rivals. Transportation connections with good markets were important in the rise of the northeastern mercantile cities from 1800 to the 1860s. Later, the expansion of dynamic industries concentrated in the younger cities of the Midwest provided new oppor-

tunities for growth. Since the depression of the 1930s, new trends in capital accumulation, markets, federal spending, energy resources, agriculture, and tourism have boosted the urbanization of southern cities.⁴ Urban services have constituted a second form of development. Police and fire protection, paved streets, adequate public utilities, and good schools enhanced the living conditions of a city and made it attractive to prospective settlers and local investors.

In their decisions about such matters as investments in transportation, loans to new businesses, and purchases of real estate tracts, elites have exercised direct control over the first type of development.⁵ But decisions regarding urban services were the public's business and lay in the realm of politics. The interests of an economic elite represented only one of many demands which politicians had to weigh. While the majority of any city's inhabitants believed that growth and development were necessary, ideas about how to promote and to finance them often differed along class lines.

Local urban politics, therefore, has involved more than just battles over patronage or conflicts between honest reformers and corrupt politicians. It has also been an arena, bounded by national economic trends, in which people with competing visions of progress and with divergent class interests clashed for control over the decisions that shaped a city's future. The socioeconomic elite have not always prevailed, and their shifting fortunes can in many respects help explain the nature and context of urban politics.⁶ This may be especially true of cities such as San Antonio, which aspire to greater success than they already have.

The Formation of the San Antonio Social and Economic Elite, 1836–77

Since 1836, San Antonio's elite has intervened at critical junctures in the city's evolution, either to provoke major economic, social, and political changes, or to set the agenda "determining which questions are considered at all and which are not."⁷ Elites are not necessarily unified, first of all because there are different areas of activity in society. San Antonio's social, economic, and political arenas most concern us here, and unity both within and among those elites has varied substantially since 1836. The extent to which San Antonio's leaders have exhibited unity and self-awareness and marshalled power has shaped the progress of the city.

Since Texas independence the larger economic environments of the United States and Republican Texas set the boundaries within which the

city would develop. From the 1830s to the 1850s the mercantile cities of the Northeast, by dint of canal and railroad construction to lower freight rates, expanded their economic hinterlands throughout the West and South and thus broke the mercantile power of the Mississippi port of New Orleans. By thus restraining southern mercantile growth, "this new transport network fostered uneven development and allowed northern prosperity to occur simultaneously with deepening southern poverty."⁸ San Antonio, an outpost on the frontier of the North American commercial system, was thus limited in its potential for capital growth.

The economy of San Antonio just after Texas independence was in ruins. The Creole forefathers, the city's upper class, found themselves in a village of a few thousand whose population consisted overwhelmingly of poor Mexicans, plus a handful of Anglos of varied backgrounds, some Creole landowning families, and a smattering of other Europeans. Smuggling, once an important part of San Antonio's prosperity, had been curtailed by the efforts of the Mexican government in retaliation for Texas independence. The economy began to recover after 1844 through the resurgence of smuggling into Mexico and the development of a fledgling commercial establishment which supplied finished goods from the Northeast to the new ranches and farms of central and south Texas.

Though San Antonio grew larger than other major cities around the state in the 1840s and 1850s, its rivals, Galveston and Houston, were more strategically located and kept San Antonio the poorest in terms of trade. It was not until the Civil War, in fact, that trading experienced a real boom, once again through smuggling. The war temporarily broke the thrall of the northeastern commercial centers in the South, stimulating sudden opportunities for capital accumulation. Texas's cotton was greatly in demand abroad but was embargoed by the South and blockaded by the North. Enterprising local merchants smuggled this precious contraband to Mexico along a "Cotton Road" from San Antonio to the Rio Grande. By the end of the Civil War the fruits of both the legal and illegal Mexican trade had put the city's commercial elite firmly on its feet. Commission companies supplied the now-burgeoning cattle industry with needed goods. The town's new banks—most formed with the profits from mercantile houses or directly from smuggling—supplied capital for the expansion of ranching. The city also served as a collection point for the northward cattle drives.⁹

By 1865 some families had already established the basis for their economic, social, and political dynasties. Four ethnic groups contributed to this development. First were the Creoles, prosperous landowning families descended from the original Spanish and Canary Island settlers. Next, a very small

number of French families arrived, becoming important merchants after independence. Some Anglo members of the future elite began to trickle into Texas even before independence. This Anglo trickle became a steady flow after 1836. Germans began to filter into San Antonio after Baron von Braunfels' colonization scheme in surrounding Central Texas disintegrated in the mid-1840s. Like the French, the Anglo and German newcomers concentrated their investments in commerce, acting as the village's link to the outside world. Intermarriage among these diverse national groups created a unified multiethnic social elite. While the Germans intermarried less than the other ethnic groups, their growing numbers and economic strength foreshadowed their integration into the new ruling class shortly after the Civil War.

As this social and economic elite formed, it sought to enhance its growing prestige and wealth with political power. The Republic of Texas granted San Antonio a municipal charter in 1837 under which the city established an eight-seat board of aldermen, each member elected from a separate ward. The first councilmen, supporters of Texas independence, all had Spanish surnames. The first mayor, however, was John W. Smith, an Anglo whose election was a portent of things to come. He had arrived in Texas in 1826 and had married into the Delgado-Curbelo family, one of the original families of San Antonio. Beginning with John Smith, the newcomers to San Antonio insinuated themselves into roles of influence, soon taking control of politics. By 1845—in a scant eight years—the Germans, Anglos, and French had squeezed the Mexican Americans from their dominant position on the board of aldermen.¹⁰ Mexican Americans would not regain significant influence on the city's governing body until the 1970s (see Chapter 5). Although the foundations of a unified social, economic, and political elite were laid prior to 1865, its consolidation occurred only in the twenty years after the Civil War. The merchants of San Antonio, who had prospered during the war, now possessed the essential ingredient for putting their power to work—capital. All the banks which would control that capital sprang from trading activities prior to 1865. Merchants with names still familiar to San Antonians today—Oppenheimer, Gross, Frost, Brackenridge, and Maverick—started banks in the period after the war. These men invested in development enterprises as diverse as a produce exchange, trolley companies, a water system, several breweries, a fair association, and barbed wire, a technological marvel that transformed cattle raising into a profitable business. Thus, the war strengthened San Antonio's mercantile enterprises and also led to some industrial development.

But the key investment by San Antonio's economic leaders was in railroads. In the early 1870s a group of merchants and businessmen persuaded the county government to help finance a rail line connecting San Antonio to Galveston. By 1885 two more lines had been completed, placing San Antonio at the center of a steel web stretching from northern Texas into Mexico. The rails brought prosperity from two directions. Cattle driven to the railroad from the surrounding ranches gave rise to the livestock commission business and, somewhat later, to meat packing. And as the cattle and beef were shipped out, tourists were shipped in. San Antonio's healthful and pleasant climate attracted throngs of visitors. The city grew at a spectacular rate because of these initiatives. In the twenty years following the Civil War, its population increased by 208 percent, to 37,600.¹¹

Although these were years of great prosperity for San Antonio, the economic elite which directed this growth was not at first united because of tensions that had arisen during the war. The German community, though economically powerful, had remained distinct socially because of its reluctance to intermarry prior to the war. When the war began, the Germans refused to support the South and thus became social and political pariahs. But at the end of the war, Texas's Republican governors rewarded the loyalty of San Antonio's Germans by appointing them to most public offices. With most Democrats disenfranchised, Germans dominated the board of aldermen for nearly twenty years thereafter.¹²

San Antonio's opportunities blunted the bitterness engendered by the Civil War. In many other Southern cities the racial passions inflamed by Reconstruction drove a searing wedge into the community, but the small size of the black population of the Alamo City kept this issue from aggravating the partisan cleavage. Furthermore, business leaders on both sides saw that the town had too much potential for wealth to waste energy on infighting. Recognizing that cooperation would reap greater profits than conflict, they buried the partisan hatchet. German businessmen entered into partnerships with Anglo-French entrepreneurs to promote San Antonio's growth. The railroad to Galveston provides a prime example of this cooperation. The Frenchmen François Guilbeau and Honoré Grenet joined Germans James H. Kampmann and Ed Steves and Anglo Willy Harvey Maverick, among others, to promote that railroad. Similarly, the city's earliest street-car company, authorized in 1874, was jointly owned by a number of influential Germans and Anglos. Spurred on by San Antonio's opportunities, the various factions within the elite—Germans, Anglos, and French, Republicans and Democrats—began to cooperate for their mutual benefit.¹³