Where is power in the urban community? Is it in the streets, or in the voting booth, or in the operation of contemporary city political machines? Images: top, Cleveland, Ohio, March 2003 (Elvin Wyly), bottom, Occupy Vancouver, October 2011 (Elvin Wyly).

Community Power
Urban Studies 200, Cities
Elvin Wyly

“Picket the mayor’s office, e-mail the city manager, bring a lawsuit in federal court, lobby the bureaucrats, bad-mouth the opposition, go on a hunger strike, get elected to the city council, convince the Chamber of Commerce, take out an ad in the newspaper, leak a juicy tale to the press, bribe a housing inspector, seize the bulletin boards, mau-mau the flak catchers, organize the grass roots, build a coalition, terrorize a neighborhood, riot, ask the ward boss, and threaten to move a factory out of town to a cheaper place, taxwise. These are some of the methods urbanites have used in the game of local politics to get what they want.”

Buried near the end of an insightful discussion on competing theories of community power, E. Barbara Phillips’ provocative, breathless list presents something of an intellectual drive-by shooting. But the approach does convey the broad array of options for action and intervention available to city residents who want a say in the life and affairs of the city. To be sure, not all of these actions has an equal chance of success; each intervention may only be appropriate under certain circumstances; and most individuals have access to a very limited set of tactics. But taken together, the list reminds us that community power is much more than the clear lines drawn out on a city organizational chart. Power is dynamic, and is often achieved through a combination of strong leadership, savvy strategic thinking and organizing, and a mix of durable and short-term alliances or coalitions. And through it all, extra-legal, informal arrangements are just as important as the formal legal provisions of a city charter.

In the elitist model, power is shared by a small and cohesive group of elites. Urban research that follows the elitist model uses various forms of reputational analysis.

Four Approaches to the Study of Community Power

In the last generation, most studies of community power have drawn inspiration from one of four main traditions.

1. The elitist model, most closely associated with the work of Floyd Hunter, holds that power is shared by a small and fairly cohesive group of elites -- most of whom bridged the worlds of business and city government.

---

2 Floyd Hunter (1953). *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. In his closing chapter, after assessing the “structural hierarchy of command and decision,” (p. 246) by a small and powerful elite, Hunter reflected on the implications for broader community participation. “Regardless of ideology, power is a necessity in modern community relations. No utopia will disband all power relations. Some men will rule, others will be ruled. The crucial question perhaps is, “How can policy be determined so that it takes into account the interests of the largest number of people?” (p. 248). In venturing answers to this
Hunter’s model was based on the method of **reputational analysis**, which involved an iterative series of panels and polls, in which people were asked to identify the most influential people in the city. Hunter then conducted interviews with many of these influential leaders, and studied their social, professional, and corporate ties.

2. The **pluralist model** presents a stark contrast. Based on the work of Robert A. Dahl,\(^3\) the pluralist approach rejected the idea that a city’s governing elite was a cohesive group. Using a technique widely known as **decision analysis**, Dahl examined the political process by which key urban issues were debated in the arenas of education, redevelopment, and the nomination process. Dahl found that decision-makers rarely held power across multiple issues, and thus the urban political field was one of pluralism, cooperation, and coalition-building. Since the issues confronting a city’s power structure change from year to year, so do the alliances and coalitions required to make decisions -- and this process of change thus creates opportunities for different groups to gain access to the political process. Although Dahl recognized the anti-democratic tendencies of elite domination of decision-making, he was optimistic that the process of coalition-building among local elites would ensure representation of diverse views.

3. The **city-as-a-growth machine model** emphasizes the interplay between political struggles **between** and **within** cities. In a landmark 1976 article, the sociologist Harvey Molotch argued that the “political and economic essence of virtually any given locality ... is growth. ... growth provides the key operative motivation toward consensus for members of politically mobilized local elites, however split they might be on other issues ... a common interest in growth is the overriding commonality among important people in a given locale. ... the very essence of a locality is its operation as a growth machine.”\(^4\) Molotch later co-authored a best-selling book with John Logan, extending and refining these themes. Although they rejected any kind of economic or geographic determinism (that would predict a natural or inevitable role for certain kinds of cities), they showed how powerful individuals and institutions found common ground in the shared goal of securing growth for a particular locality. Viewed from the perspective of a particular city, the competition is a zero-sum game: “In any given year,” any nation or region will “see the construction of a certain number of new factories, office units, and highways -- regardless of

---


In the **city-as-a-growth machine model**, local politics are shaped by the imperative for a city to gain as much regional and national growth as possible. Growth serves as a unifying force of local politics: individuals and groups who disagree on many things at the local or neighborhood level will set their differences aside to pursue the common goal of growth attracted to their city instead of another place. Developers and property owners will fight, for example, over local issues like where to build a new convention center, or where a new transit corridor should be located, or whether regulations should be changed to encourage a different mixture of office, retail, and residential land uses in a particular part of a city — and then often the next day, the same developers and property owners will join together to try to persuade a large multinational company to locate a new office in the city. Labor unions engaged in tough fights with corporate management over wages and working conditions are more than willing to work with management to try to attract new investment and new jobs to the city. Disagreements on local issues inside a city are set aside in order to pursue the shared mission of the city’s growth in the competition with other cities. Molotch’s work reveals how growth is

"...the central issue for those serious people who care about their locality and who have the resources to make their caring felt as a political force. The city is, for those who count, a growth machine.”

4. The **urban regime model** emphasizes the interplay between the public and private sectors. The elitist and pluralist models (and to a lesser degree the growth-machine model) portray city politics in terms of the formal decisions made by City Council and the other formal realms of government. Private business interests are crucial, of course, but only in terms of how elite business interests fight for influence over the decisions of a mayor or council member, or how elite business figures decide to move into city politics themselves. The underlying assumption of this approach is that while business interests and the imperatives of growth are always important in shaping the kinds of decisions that are made in local politics, for the most part those decisions will be happening in City Hall, or on City Council, or the other formal institutions of local government.

This assumption worked fairly well in the study of urban politics until a massive transition took place between the 1970s and 1980s. This transition involved a great intensification of the competitive pressures cities faced with expanded globalization, and a dramatic move of

---

In the urban regime model, power is managed by an informal but stable alignment of groups and institutions in both the public and private sectors. Regimes are durable, but they are not permanent. Regimes involve much more than the official lines of authority on an organizational chart: they are relationships that involve individuals and institutions from different sectors forced to cooperate to make decisions within the context of economic constraints.

Regime theory begins with the recognition that power is fragmented, because the private market and city government both have different kinds of resources. Local government has policy-making authority -- whatever powers a higher level of government has allowed a city to do on its own -- and, more importantly, popular legitimacy. Authority and legitimacy are extremely important resources. On the other hand, private business interests have different kinds of resources: pools of capital that can be used to finance important urban initiatives, and to generate new jobs or enhance tax revenues. Regime analysis is the study of the relatively durable, but never permanent, coalitions between public and private groups -- working with other groups that care about local issues -- that must cooperate in order to make decisions in the context of broader economic constraints. Several aspects of the theory are crucial.

---

7 This process often works quite well in the first few years after a privatization decision, because the single largest cost item for most city services is labor: all else constant, replacing unionized city workers with non-union, lower-paid private employees will lead to dramatic cost-savings (and thus lucrative profits) for a newly-privatized institution. Over the long run, however, the efficiency and cost-savings case for privatization is far more ambiguous, and counting labor as only a ‘cost’ ignores the importance of well-paid jobs for community economic development.

1. ‘A regime is “an informal yet relatively stable group with access to institutional resources that enable it to have a sustained role in making governing decisions.”\textsuperscript{9}

2. Regimes are made up not only of formal local government and private business, but also other groups and institutions that have the capacity to affect the popular legitimacy of elite decisions. Social movements of neighborhood residents mobilizing on particular issues can affect an urban regime, but in order to truly become part of an urban regime, these movements must be fairly large, sustained, and long-term -- or else very strategically sophisticated.

3. The essence of a regime is cooperation between individuals and institutions representing different, and often directly opposed, interests. Cooperation is not a given, and thus \textit{it is wrong to assume that all cities have urban regimes}. In fact, one of the most interesting current debates in the urban regime literature is whether the concept works in places where the public sector remains dominant in city affairs.

4. A new mayor and/or a new city council does not necessarily mean a new regime. Regimes are relatively durable coalitions that usually last more than one local election cycle.

5. It is often possible to identify distinctive policy agendas, depending on the participants in various governing coalitions. The most common are “development” regimes, but there are also middle-class progressive regimes, civil-rights oriented regimes, “defensive” regimes in hard-hit deindustrialized cities struggling to preserve what they can of local quality of life, and several others.

\textbf{Disagreement, but on a shared foundation}

The elitist, pluralist, growth machine, and urban regime models lie at the heart of a broad literature on urban political power. This literature has been marked by healthy debate and disagreement for many years. Differences in disciplinary perspectives shape the kinds of questions asked by different analysts; different research methods help to strengthen particular explanations while weakening others; and contrasts in theoretical orientation, scales of analysis, and political ideology also play a role in the accounts offered by those studying community power. It is crucial recognize, however, the common assumption of all of these models. Despite substantial differences in method and interpretation, advocates of the elite, pluralist, and city-as-growth machine models all agree that local politics matters. This assumption is a sharp dividing line between urbanists and those in economics, political science, and sociology who view cities as inherently subordinate to “higher-level” forces at the level of the nation-state or the global economy. The most definitive statement on this point was Paul E. Peterson’s \textit{City Limits}, which began with a challenge to the kind of thinking embodied in the work of Hunter, Dahl, Molotch, and

and others. “Too often cities are treated as if they were nation-states. What is known about the politics of nations, it is said, can be applied to the politics of cities within them. ... Cities are little political systems, or miniature republics, or national politics writ small enough to be studied with ease.” Peterson challenges this line of reasoning: “It is the burden of my argument that local politics is not like national politics. On the contrary, by comparison with national politics local politics is most limited. There are crucial kinds of public policies that local governments simply cannot execute. They cannot make war or peace; they cannot issue passports or forbid outsiders from entering their territory; they cannot issue currency; and they cannot control imports or erect tariff walls. ... City politics is limited politics.”

**Have the “City Limits” Become Even More Limited?**

Peterson’s obituary for the study of city politics -- limited politics -- inaugurated an important debate in the 1980s and 1990s, and the expansion of transnational networks, the rise of multinational corporations, and the gradual retrenchment of many federal governments from urban concerns seems to have vindicated *City Limits*. For some cities, accidents of geography or history provide a bounty of transnational investment and growth, and local politics becomes a matter of dividing the spoils, and ensuring order and stability amidst rapid change. For other cities, the race to attract new investment, wealthy visitors, and middle-class residents has become ever more intense. City politics seems to be ever more limited politics.

The sense of crisis, and of the limits of city politics, seemed to reach its worst point in North America in the tough economic climate of the early 1990s. But the ensuing years of the 1990s brought a rapid and pronounced economic rebound in many large cities, and by the end of the decade cities seemed to be “back on the agenda.” In part, this more favorable situation reflected the easing of underlying structural problems; but it also resulted from the actions of charismatic, innovative mayors, who managed to build new relations between city governments and private-sector growth machines.

Still, the ‘urban’ only seems to play a prominent role in political debate in times of crisis. Hurricane Katrina offers perhaps the most vivid and sudden illustration of the political implications of crisis. After inundating vast areas of the Southern Louisiana and Mississippi coastal zones, the aftermath of the storm breached levees in New Orleans and eventually led to the displacement of nearly half a million people from the region. The belated and incoherent response of the Federal government led to angry recriminations among local, state, and federal officials; attracted unusually harsh press coverage that played a major role in declining public approval for the Bush Administration; and led President Bush to announce a major Federal commitment to rebuilding the city, beginning with a request for an emergency Congressional appropriation of $60 billion. But the storm and its aftermath also brought enormous press coverage, both positive and negative, to New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin. Before the hurricane, Nagin was widely seen as a product of the “growth machine” perspective on community power. Even the city’s official journal of growth-machine politics, *New Orleans City Business*, noted that before Katrina, Nagin’s “biggest headache was in the African American community where ministers and other leaders claimed he was too beholden to business interests and not as

---

interested in the needs of the poor.”

After the storm, his key problems involved the costs of his flamboyant but inconsistent leadership style -- and conflicts with the City Council. In October 2005, Nagin appointed a high-level committee to supervise the city’s redevelopment, but the City Council then formed its own committee. Looking towards the postponed Mayoral election (planned for February 2006, ultimately culminating in a run-off election in April), Nagin’s prospects depended on the interplay of a) voters’ different perceptions of his leadership in the aftermath of the disaster, and b) uncertainty over who those voters would be.

But both of these factors provide vivid illustrations of the class and racial politics bound up in New Orleans with the city-as-a-growth machine perspective on community power. Negative press coverage of Nagin’s more outlandish public statements has undermined some of his political support among White voters. “This is a concern for Nagin because White voters are expected to become a top demographic in the electorate in the post-Katrina New Orleans.”

The disproportionate burden of flooding and displacement fell on the city’s poor and African American neighborhoods, and there is a widespread expectation that it is these residents -- dispersed across cities and towns from Georgia to Texas -- who will be least likely to be willing or able to return to the city. The Federal Secretary of Housing and Urban Development told a reporter for the Houston Chronicle, “Whether we like it or not, New Orleans is not going to be 500,000 people for a long time,” and “New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again.” Jesse Jackson offered this interpretation: “We’re learning that when Bush promised to remove the legacy of racism from New Orleans, he meant he’d remove the poor who were victims of that racism.” And so Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu (the brother of U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu) challenged Nagin in the election. “Mayor of New Orleans is a ‘smaller’ position than lieutenant governor but as the nation watches New Orleans rebuild over the next few years, the mayor of New Orleans will be the highest profile position in the state.” To further complicate things, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued a ruling barring the Secretary of State of Louisiana from gaining access to records that would allow city or state officials to locate and contact the city’s displaced residents; the Secretary of State had hoped to contact each voter displaced by the storm and provide information on getting an absentee ballot for the election. Uncertainty prevailed for several weeks, because the Secretary of State considered postponing the election if FEMA did not relent. In any event, Nagin still had some support from key factions of the city’s growth machine. A local real estate power-broker, Joseph C. Canizaro, “has emerged as perhaps the single most influential business executive from New Orleans. One fellow business leader calls him the local Donald Trump. But Mr. Canizaro derives his influence far less from a flamboyant style than from his close ties to President Bush as well as to Mr. Nagin, and that combination could make him a pivotal figure in deciding how and where New Orleans will be resurrected.”

---

12 Crouere, “Katrina Revamp.”
14 Jackson, “Eased Out.”
15 Crouere, “Katrina Revamp.”
Nagin ultimately won the runoff election, in a vote that was widely seen as a reluctant backing of a New Orleans politician, problematic as he may be, against an opponent viewed as attractive to ‘outsiders’ in the rest of Louisiana.

What are the Limits to City Limits?

Despite the odds, many urbanists today are not convinced that “city politics is limited politics.” There is a vibrant literature in urban political science devoted to the study of urban regimes -- relatively stable alignments of key business interests and city political leaders that can be understood as a combination of the elitist and city-as-growth-machine models of community power. Why?

First, many political scientists and sociologists have challenged the idea of an inevitable force of globalization. These analysts have shown how the changing organization of the nation-state in response to globalization has been part of an active, deliberate strategy on the part of powerful coalitions. Since the 1970s, national commitments to “urban” issues have been reduced, and replaced with a combination of flexible, market-oriented arrangements that put the competitive burden at the city or regional level. This is known by various terms. Sometimes it’s called “devolution,” sometimes it’s called “downloading.” But the key point is that the trend is anything but natural: it is the product of specific strategies on how to organize the public sector and its relation to private-market institutions.¹⁷

Second, some analysts have suggested that this devolution is a last-ditch sign of crisis at the nation-state level, a “search for a new spatiotemporal fix for neoliberalism,”¹⁸ and that it opens up key spaces of possibility at the city level -- for mayors and others with formal, legal power, but also for those traditionally excluded from institutional power structures. Melissa Gilbert, a feminist geographer, documents the long struggle of a group of inner-city welfare recipients in Philadelphia (the Kensington Welfare Rights Union) to secure better treatment from a hostile city and state bureaucracy. When activists were frustrated in their efforts at the city level, they marched on Harrisburg, the state capitol; and when the national government passed welfare “reform” legislation that replaced an entitlement program with a discretionary block grant, activists tried to organize around the issue on a transnational scale; one KWRU leader traveled to a United Nations conference to argue that U.S. welfare reform was a violation of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Neil Smith, Director of the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics at the City University of New York, has written widely on the theoretical and strategic implications of this move, which he describes as “jumping scales.” And it is not just activists who challenge Peterson’s ideas of City Limits; consider the case of Rudy Giuliani:

> “Angry at the abandon with which United Nations (UN) diplomats seemed to flaunt local parking laws, and blaming them for much of Manhattan’s gridlock, Giuliani threatened to begin towing illegally parked cars with diplomatic plates. Now openly derided for his policies of petty and not so petty repression, ‘Benito’ Giuliani (as even the New York Times nicknamed him) was just as angry at the

---

US State Department for seemingly capitulating to this UN vehicular malfeasance. Maybe it has come to the point, Giuliani huffed, where New York City needs to have its own foreign policy. The larger point is that amidst a restructuring of the relationship between capital and the state ... there is also a rescaling of urban practices, cultures, and functions ..."19

Third, leadership does matter. Community power may have changed, and in many circumstances it remains quite limited. But it remains significant, and city limits can be pushed and challenged. Robert J. Waste, a Professor of Public Policy at California State, Sacramento, distills this complex history into distinct periods that hold important lessons for debates over community power in the United States. He portrays the period from 1946 to 1996 as the period of “Washington’s Cities” -- a period in which the federal government created a variety of urban aid programs and other interventions, but in ways that ignored local context, or that ensured dependence on federal decisions and criteria. “Jefferson’s Cities,” by contrast, represent the decentralized and independent groundswell of governmental innovation that began to achieve notable successes by the mid-1990s. “...most federally driven and managed federal-local urban interventions have failed -- or worse, have actually exacerbated urban problems and the permanent crisis in American cities, while many locally designed and managed metro interventions succeed.”20 Waste documents a broad array of policy efforts at the city and metropolitan level that have succeeded, particularly when some federal assistance has been available to accomplish locally-defined goals, and he proposes a series of policies to help create a system of “Independent Cities.” And he warns that community power must be recognized and acknowledged, or else more radical solutions may be in order. Among his most provocative: “Metro Senators: If Wyoming, Alaska, and Vermont Have Senators -- Why Not New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago?”21

Conclusion

The debate over community power, then, remains as vibrant as it was a generation ago, when the tensions of elitist and pluralist interpretations became so clear. Although global integration seems to have weakened the power of cities to fight broad economic forces, most urban political analysts are not willing to accept the obituary for urban community power as written by Peterson. At least for those scholars who are influential in urban political analysis, there is an important consensus that the “urban” still does matter.