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Raphael J. Sonenshein: The City at Stake

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The Politics of Reform

THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISM MEETS

THE NEW DIVERSITY

Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.

—John F. Kennedy, 1962

IN THE FACE OF global disorder, the fall of empires, the movement of peoples across national boundaries, and agitation for secession, can government adapt? Can government at all levels reform itself, or be reformed? Can it be flexible and improve its performance and responsiveness? Can government cope with diversity of race, ethnicity, class, religion, and place, and can it respond to the needs of disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups? Can government change its own institutional patterns in order to be more nimble and creative? What are the prospects for the reform of government in an age of diversity?

It is not just America's cities that wrestle with these questions. But it is in America's cities that some of the answers may be found. There is probably no level of government in the United States or perhaps worldwide that compares to the American city as a site for experimentation in the reform of political institutions and, at the same time, as a place of diversity. The American city has been the main outlet for the ideas and programs of institutional reform.

But where political scientists once marveled at the potential of Progressive reform, the study of urban reform has fallen on many decades of hard times.

The belief that institutional structure matters played a central role in the titanic urban struggles of a century ago. The politics of American cities were once dominated by the conflict over the structure of local government, and the impact that structure would have on who would rule cities. Then, as now, the diversity shaped by immigration served as a backdrop for the struggle.

In city after city, reformers fought the political machines to restructure the organization of city government. The stakes were enormous, and included both the material resources of city government and the political symbols of leadership. It was a struggle over power, a battle of philosophies

and visions, and a conflict among social classes and ethnic groups. The battle was over urban democracy itself.

The visions of the two sides in the reform struggle could not have been more different or more sincerely opposed. The machine politicians disdained the reformers as “morning glories,” and accused them of being elitists who wanted to disenfranchise the immigrant working classes. The reformers believed that corruption hurt workers, who would benefit less from a turkey at Christmas than from a well-operated city government.

Political scientists were entranced by the debate, and even personally active in it. Issues of the *American Political Science Review* contained updates of the latest reform battles. Most scholars were on the side of the reformers, although sociologists saw in the political machine certain qualities that made it valuable (Merton 1968). Unlike the sober and serious-minded reformers, machine politicians were endlessly colorful and fascinating (Gosnell 1937; Riordan 1963).

Political scientists, however, by and large lost interest in the urban reform movement. The urban Progressives of the last century had an often well-deserved reputation for cloaking class warfare in good-government rhetoric. The charge that reformers were seeking to disempower immigrants and working-class voters was often on the mark. Hostility to immigrants and minorities motivated many reformers, and many sought to devise “neutral” structures that would enhance their own influence in the city (Salisbury 1961).

The history of nonpartisanship and at-large elections lends support to this view. Minority political power was severely limited by at-large elections, which made it extremely difficult for minority candidates to win seats on city councils. Nonpartisanship reduced levels of participation among working class and minority voters, and advantaged the white middle class (Welch and Bledsoe 1988).

The study of urban reform also suffered from methodological changes in political science. The behavioral movement focused close attention not on the structure of urban institutions, but on the informal pathways of power. The central debate in urban politics became: Who holds the actual power in the city? Structuralists saw private centers of power that could manipulate city politics to their economic advantage. Pluralists saw a city of diverse interests in which political leaders could make decisions with some autonomy from private power brokers.

An updated structuralist argument saw power in the city resting in the hands of a “growth machine” dedicated to controlling land use (Logan and Molotch 1987). Clarence Stone (1989) reframed the debate on urban power with his regime theory, which suggested that cities are governed by coalitions of public and private power. In these discussions of power, the design and reform of political institutions were distant concerns.

According to Gittell (1994, 136), the failure to take seriously the reform of urban democratic institutions has consequences for how we view cities:

There has been a visible lack of interest in structural and process reform of cities. The vitality of the grassroots reform efforts of the 1970's, which looked to expansion of citizen participation and the role of neighborhood and community organizations, was depreciated by the pessimism of growth politics. This change in the emphasis of urban scholarship took its toll on the political and intellectual status of the city in American political life.

REEXAMINING URBAN REFORM

It is time to reexamine the potential of urban reform. The demands on government to become more effective and responsive make it necessary. Changing intellectual cross-currents and analytical tools make it possible. This is not just a theoretical issue. For those who are involved in practical politics, a greater understanding of political reform is essential. Those who control the high ground of reform have a pronounced edge in urban politics and government. For progressive and minority communities in particular, the potential of reform coalitions has been insufficiently appreciated.

Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) argue in *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* that there has been significant movement in the direction of citizen participation and greater governmental responsiveness in a number of American cities. The authors see in the movement for neighborhood participation signs of an enhanced urban democracy.

These steps have been bolstered by theorists who contend that cities are showing the potential for greater autonomy in economic development (Clarke and Gaile 2000). Scholars in Europe have been drawing attention to the reform and decentralization of local government (Amnå and Montin 2000). There is reason to question the highly pessimistic and limited view of urban autonomy expressed in Peterson's *City Limits* (1981).

The field of globalization studies has been moving steadily toward a greater recognition of the importance of local politics in the global city. New attention has been paid to the claims made by "new social movements" for representation and power within the city. These tentative explorations of the political and electoral spheres are important steps for a field that has previously devalued local political processes (Clarke and Gaile 1997; Sassen 2000; Purcell 2002).

A number of cities have reformed their charters as a method to reexamine the effectiveness and responsiveness of governing institutions. Within the

last fifteen years alone, major charter reforms have been conducted in New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

Can there be a new Progressive era at the municipal level that revives democracy and enhances government (Levine 2000)? Will there be a rebirth of urban democracy? What will be the consequences of urban reform movements for minority incorporation? Will urban reform be dominated by white constituencies, with minority groups on the outside? Will contemporary urban reform be liberal, conservative, or ideologically undefined?

Benjamin and Mauro (1989, 11–12) highlight the differences between contemporary and “classical” urban reform. They argue that there are two critical differences. “Democracy is now the primary goal; achieving efficiency is secondary.” Secondly, the new reformers seek to embrace and expand the political system instead of disdaining politics. I would add a third difference: the reformers of today must respond to demographic diversity not as a force to be feared, but as a key reason to reform and expand the reach of political institutions.

There are, however, vast differences among reformers about how to achieve those worthy goals, and those differences tap into a range of political constituencies. It is certainly no longer a simple matter of upper-status people calling for reform and working-class people opposing it.

The battle today is really not between the reformers and the party regulars. It is between competing visions of urban reform: for example, businesslike efficiency weighed against greater representation for minorities. And that is why the study of reform in western cities where reform has been the dominant ideal can be most revealing.

The reexamination of urban reform is facilitated by a renewed interest in urban institutions. A new institutionalism has emerged in political science that incorporates behavioral models, but assumes that just as behavior shapes institutions, institutions shape behavior (March and Olsen 1984).

New institutionalists have reopened the question of the impact of institutions on political behavior. In so doing, they have indirectly brought the question of reform back to the table. As March and Olsen argue, “Political democracy depends not only on economic and social conditions but also on the design of political institutions” (1984, 738).

What we are only beginning to learn is the *chemistry* by which institutional change, or reform, occurs. Institutions shape behavior, but people make choices with imperfect information and uncertainty about whom to trust. Reforms are not abstract ideas. They are competing proposals that require elite and mass constituencies, and which may in the hands of different leaders activate different constituencies. Successful reform is a mixture of lofty ideals and effective politics.

Much of traditional institutional analysis elaborates the inertial forces that prevent change; more research is needed to identify the dynamics by

which institutional reform actually occurs. As Pierson (2000, 476) has noted, “Political scientists have had much more to say about institutional effects than about institutional origins and change.”

Institutionalists have tended to emphasize the limitations that institutions place on political choices. Pierson (2000) refers to the “lock-in” effects by which institutional actors constrain the behavior of future actors. He explores a series of prior commitments by which political leaders seek to limit themselves and their successors, thereby “locking in” the status quo. Others discuss the “stickiness” of institutions, or the decision costs involved in institutional change (Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen, 2003). Ferman (1997) shows how the dominance of different arenas of power in a community shapes the possibility of participatory reforms.

The reform of governmental institutions is an extraordinarily difficult task. As Pierson indicates (2000, 490–91), “formal political institutions are usually change-resistant. . . . Efforts to change rules higher in the hierarchy (e.g., constitutions) require even greater levels of consensus.”

Demands that government officials reform themselves and alter the structure of their world are likely to be met with defensiveness and self-justifications. Buffeted by charges that the government is poorly organized or badly run, they draw inside their comfortable world of city hall, away from the noise of the invading hordes.

It is critical to understand the obstacles to the reform of political institutions, if only to reduce the disappointment that reform is not more frequent or easy, and to appreciate the significance of reform when it does happen. But we are still left with the question of how reform happens at all. And how does reform interact with the social, racial, ethnic, and economic forces within the community?

To understand how reform can be accomplished, the new institutionalism can best be utilized in combination with behavioral approaches. Institutional analysis is now beginning to help elaborate the dynamics of reform. Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen (2003) have presented an ambitious analysis of how “policy punctuations” occur in American political institutions. Noting that institutions have “friction” that resists change, they contend that major changes occur in sudden bursts after long periods of relative stability.

In their study of the adoption of direct democracy reforms, Bowler, Donovan, and Carp (2002) argue that reform efforts are the result of two sets of forces: exogenous and endogenous. Exogenous forces are external to the institutional structure and create strong pressures to reform. But endogenous forces within the institution may be equally important. Despite the view that institutional actors are entirely resistant to reform, Bowler and his colleagues show that if people within an institution favor change, they can join with exogenous forces to bring it about.

Given the tendency of institutions to be stable, to be responsive to exogenous forces and to the beliefs of leaders about the appropriate form of institutions, how can coalitions be built to create reform? And can the new institutionalism be extended into the areas of racial and ethnic diversity?

Reformers must create an effective coalition to prevail over the forces of “lock-in” and “stickiness,” to overcome the tendency toward institutional inertia and incremental change. The study of institutional reform has focused its attention on elite actors. Yet for reform to succeed, it must also gain a constituency in the electorate. After all, popular response to proposed reforms is likely to play an important role in the prospects for reform.

Until recent years, urban politics and government have not been major sites for the application of the new institutionalism. That has begun to change (e.g., Ferman 1997; Steinacker 2001). In the condition of racial and ethnic diversity that characterizes America’s twenty-first-century urban scene, how can institutions change? What is the connection between the new institutionalism and the new diversity?

REFORM AND THE POLITICS OF DIVERSITY

In his study of school reform, Clarence Stone (1998) applied regime theory to the question of reform. Stone argued that reform is not just a set of ideas or, in the case of schools, a new superintendent. Reform is a process of coalition creation and maintenance. Reform can be implemented and institutionalized only if a long-term coalition is built. These coalition battles will be fought on terrain that involves interests and ideologies maintained by diverse racial, class, and ethnic groups (Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux 1999; Portz, Stein, and Jones 1999; Stone, Henig, Jones, and Pierannunzi 2001).

Can cross-racial coalitions be built to pursue reform ideals? Can the mixture of self-interest and belief that helps define coalition development be activated in the interests of improving government? Is reform relevant to minority and disadvantaged communities? Is there any role for beliefs or ideologies in the politics of reform coalitions?

As race and ethnicity are integral parts of urban politics, the process of reform is likely to activate racial divisions and coalitions. Some believe that such coalitions are built on self-interest alone. Rational actors will find partners to maximize mutual advantage (Riker 1961). In matters of race, some find that only self-interest can overcome racial animosity (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). Others see beliefs and shared ideologies as fundamental (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984).

I have developed a model of interracial coalitions that suggests that interest, ideology and leadership are of fundamental importance in coalitions.

tions. Interests are real and can influence the outcome of coalitions, but interests themselves are shaped by the actions of leaders. In other words, interest conflicts may be real or they may be perceived; much depends on how key political leaders shape the debate (Sonenshein 1993). Ideological agreement helps to build leadership trust. Leadership connections are essential to coalitions because they build the trust that is needed to overcome mutual suspicion (Hinckley 1981). Voluntary choices by people are critical to coalitions.

The dynamics of coalition building—ideology, interest, and leadership—will play a key role in whether coalitions can be built, and whether they can endure. Coalition patterns may be structured and stable, as in the urban racial politics of the 1970s and 1980s. Alternatively, coalition patterns may be complex and multidimensional. It is no longer certain that the African American position will be the white liberal position, or that Latinos will join with African Americans. In a big city, reform coalitions may or may not be progressive multiracial coalitions, and in a diverse setting with a rising role for Latinos, they may not always include African Americans.

With urban politics shaped by dividing lines of race, ethnicity, ideology, and geography, some groups will have greater stakes in the status quo than will others. They may perceive that their interests will be affected favorably or unfavorably by proposed reforms.

As in the formation of coalitions for racial equality, alliances for reform will not be solely determined by self-interest narrowly defined. In a study of the failure of a proposed reform to adopt regional governance in Miami, Steinacker (2001) shows that the effects of self-interest are balanced by the role of a leading policy entrepreneur, how the proposed reform is framed to the public, and the timing that opens and closes a window of opportunity. These factors emerge strongly in the Los Angeles charter reform story.

The notion that urban reform is intricately involved in the minority search for equality has received little attention. Yet the story of the rise and fall of minority coalitions in American cities is also the story of reform. Beginning in the 1960s, minorities and white liberals wrote a new chapter in the governance of cities (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984). A central feature of progressive minority coalitions was the connection between minority communities and liberal whites (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984). In city after city, the ability of minority candidates to win the support of a share of white liberals made up for the loss of those whites who were reluctant to support a minority candidate. The triumph of minority incorporation was simultaneously the triumph of urban liberalism, white and nonwhite (Sonenshein 1993).

While there is widespread recognition that *ideology* played a central role in the surge of urban minority power, there is less understanding that *urban*

reform played an important role in that development. The rise of African American mayoral candidates in most cities happened outside of, and often in opposition to, regular Democratic party forces. Harold Washington was elected in Chicago as the city's first African American mayor, but also as a reformer who pledged to clean up party corruption. He was opposed by the great majority of party organization leaders.

Kenneth Gibson in Newark in 1970 challenged both the Democratic party and the forces of organized crime that had corrupted city government (Sonenshein 1971). John V. Lindsay, the minority-supported mayor of New York City, was well-known as a "silk-stocking" urban reformer who was outside the party machine.

In Los Angeles, Tom Bradley rose up within the Democratic party by leading the Los Angeles wing of the reform Democratic movement. He was bitterly opposed to the statewide Democratic party organization headed by Jesse Unruh and Mervyn Dymally. Bradley's organization was not only liberal and biracial; it was also an alliance of reformers. They were perfectly suited to win power in a city structured by nonpartisan elections and with a widely held belief in political reform (Sonenshein 1993).

Thus, reform in the 1960s and 1970s was essential to the rise of minority politics. This connection had occurred earlier, during the era of immigrants searching for representation. In his study of progressive coalitions in the first part of the twentieth century, Finegold (1995a, b) showed that in those cities where immigrant and working-class communities formed alliances with reformers, their chances of political success were greater than in cities where they lacked a reform agenda. In other words, urban reform often had a *progressive* role in urban coalitions.

In retrospect, the connection between black politics and white liberal reform politics seems natural. But for many years, it was an uphill battle to forge those alliances. It was a political process of coalition building. In those cities with strong and powerful party organizations, reformers had a difficult time persuading minority activists that the rewards of reform politics outweighed the concrete benefits offered by the machine.

Even in Los Angeles, where party organizations were weak or nonexistent, the barriers to linkage between black activists and white reformers were formidable. In his study of reform Democrats in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, James Q. Wilson (1962) noted the negative attitudes that black politicians and white liberal reformers had toward each other (1962, 80). Conversely, many African American politicians felt that the liberal reformers were blind to the interests of the black community, and had little to offer in the way of political benefits (Sonenshein 1993, 49).

In western cities, where party organizations were overshadowed by the nonpartisan model of urban government, minority activists had to develop their own progressive model of reform. The status quo regimes, built around

nonpartisan and at-large elections, were themselves reform-based (Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984). The only way to beat an earlier regime of conservative reformers was to become *progressive* reformers (Sonenshein 1993). At the same time, the lack of traditional party inducements for partial minority incorporation made it easier to build outsider unity around challenges to the system.

Because this movement for minority incorporation was not only built around shared liberal ideology, but also around the doctrines of urban reform, it had a greater community appeal than simply minority identification and liberal ideology. Its opponents fell back on racist attacks, or on dirty tricks, or on fear, but could not articulate a thoughtful reform agenda of their own. Mayor Hugh Addonizio of Newark was in federal court after his indictment on corruption charges when he ran against African American city engineer Kenneth Gibson (Sonenshein 1971). Sam Yorty could defeat Tom Bradley in 1969 only with an openly racist campaign. The only vision of governance these opponents shared was the fear of change and a rejection of a role for minorities in city leadership. Black mayors and their supporters held the high ground of reform.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, African American mayors in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia, then the four largest cities, were succeeded by white mayors (Sonenshein, Schockman, and DeLeon 1996). In Cleveland and Detroit, African American candidates drawing support more from whites than from blacks defeated African American candidates whose base of support rested among blacks. Not only did white mayoral candidates and moderate black candidates drawing support from white voters win mayoral victories; even Republicans enjoyed success. In the two largest American cities, New York City and Los Angeles, Republican mayoral candidates swept to victory in 1993.

The new mayors were an eclectic lot. There were strong Democrats like Richard M. Daley, Jr., in Chicago and Edward Rendell in Philadelphia (Bissinger 1997), and of course Republicans Richard Riordan and Rudolph Giuliani. What they seemed to have in common was an emphasis on reforming government operations and, if necessary, government structures, and in the three largest cities, opposition from African American voters. They appealed to white middle-class voters, but also won significant support from Latinos and Asian Americans (Sleeper 1993). While cities continued to elect black mayors (Alozic 2000), the mantle of reform had subtly shifted.

The alienation of white middle-class voters led to a new kind of urban reform. In the era when minority complaints drove the reform agenda, the threat of civil disorder drove municipal reform. Today, it is the threat of exit, tax revolt, or secession.

Mayor Ed Koch of New York City (1977–89) was a precursor of these developments. A former liberal turned conservative, Koch built a center-

right coalition that drew support from middle-class whites, Jews, and Latinos. As John Mollenkopf demonstrates in his study of the Koch coalition, Koch managed to appeal to many of the liberal reformers who had worked for Mayor John Lindsay and also to good government groups (Mollenkopf 1992, 191).

Just as the connection between the African American movement and urban reform is often overlooked, so has the connection between these “new mayors” and the energy of reform. It became harder for minority and liberal coalitions to develop and communicate a reform vision that could match the white-led coalition view of urban leadership, beyond the defense of institutional protections hard-won through the struggle for minority incorporation. The loss of connection between minority and liberal reform politics contributed to the difficulty of creating new progressive multiracial coalitions.

In this sense, the new mayors were quite different from the white reactionary mayors of the 1960s and 1970s, even though their electoral coalitions bore much similarity. The decline of minority coalitions came with the decline of liberal urban reform, and its replacement with less liberal versions of reform.

The significance of the “new mayors” as reformers should not be underestimated. But neither should it be considered an inherent feature of *conservatism*. Urban reform does not have to be conservative.

Reform can be a vehicle for a liberal mayor of Oakland (Jerry Brown) to expand his authority over the schools, but it can also be a means by which a Republican mayor of Los Angeles (Richard Riordan) gets the authority to increase the number of city jobs exempt from civil service. There are progressive reforms, such as the shift from at-large to district elections and police reform. As reform moves from being perceived as an ideological tool of the upper class to a contested symbol, the prospects for wider participation in urban politics increase.

The contemporary setting for reform coalitions has also been influenced by the major changes caused by immigration. Massive levels of immigration to American cities moved a dialogue about black and white (that tended to fit rather neatly into a conservative-liberal dichotomy) into a broader setting of diversity.

Immigration changed the roles of key urban players. African Americans, once the exemplar of the minority struggle, now competed for physical space, jobs, and political power with Latinos and Asian Americans. To some degree, African Americans felt pressure as an established urban group facing the challenge of an up-and-coming bloc. In this setting, African Americans might resist institutional reforms that could further jeopardize their already precarious standing. But to new immigrants, some reform proposals might seem to offer a welcome reshuffling of the deck.

As a result, the possibilities for shaking up the stable alliances of recent decades have become greater than before.

This study examines the formation of elite and mass constituencies for major governmental reform in one major city characterized by demographic diversity. How were the interests and ideologies of key groups in Los Angeles shaped by leaders into a winning coalition? How durable is this coalition for reform? What does this reform battle tell us about how reform happens in the twenty-first-century city? And what will the “new” groups of immigrants choose among the options placed before them?