City Politics

The Political Economy of Urban America

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PEARSON
1 City Politics in America: An Introduction 1

PART I THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN URBAN POLITICS: THE FIRST CENTURY

2 The Enduring Legacy 14
3 Party Machines and the Immigrants 48
4 The Reform Crusades 75
5 Urban Voters and the Rise of a National Democratic Majority 110

PART II THE URBAN CRISIS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

6 The City/Suburban Divide 136
7 National Policy and the City/Suburban Divide 174
8 Federal Programs and the Divisive Politics of Race 201
9 The Rise of the Sunbelt 227

PART III THE FRACTURED METROPOLIS

10 The Rise of the Fragmented Metropolis 252
11 Governing the Fragmented Metropolis 277
12 The Metropolitan Battleground 309
13 The Renaissance of the Metropolitan Center 339
14 Governing the Divided City 372
15 City and Metropolis in the Global Era 398
CONTENTS

Preface  x

1  City Politics in America: An Introduction  1
   Three Themes  1
   The Politics of Growth  3
   The Politics of Governance  6
   The Fragmented Metropolis  8
   The Challenge of the Global Era  9

PART I  THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN URBAN POLITICS: THE FIRST CENTURY

2  The Enduring Legacy  14
   National Development and the Cities  14
      Outtake: City Building has Always Required Public Efforts  15
   A Century of Urban Growth  16
   Inter-Urban Rivalries  20
   Industrialization and Community  25
   The Immigrant Tide  29
   The Capacity to Govern  35
   The Limited Powers of Cities  40

3  Party Machines and the Immigrants  48
   Machines and Machine-Style Politics  48
      Outtake: Machines Had Two Sides  50
   The Origins of Machine Politics  51
   Did Machines “Get the Job Done”?  55
   Were Machines Vehicles of Upward Mobility?  59
Did the Machines Help Immigrants Assimilate? 61
The Social Reform Alternative 64
Ethnic Politics in Today’s Cities 67

4 The Reform Crusades 75
The Reformers’ Aims 75
Outtake: Municipal Reform Was Aimed at the Immigrants 77
The Fertile Environment for Reform 77
The Campaigns Against Machine Rule 80
“Efficiency and Economy” in Municipal Affairs 87
The Business Model 92
Commission and Manager Government 94
Did Reform Kill the Machines? 97
The Reform Legacy 99

5 Urban Voters and the Rise of a National Democratic Majority 110
City and Nation in the Twentieth Century 110
Outtake: Urban Ethnics Became a Mainstay of the Democratic Party 111
A New Political Consciousness 112
The Changing Political Balance 114
The Depression and the Cities 117
Cities Gain a Voice 122
The Urban Programs of the New Deal 126
The New Deal Legacy 129

PART II THE URBAN CRISIS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

6 The City/Suburban Divide 136
A Century of Demographic Change 136
Outtake: Anti-Immigrant Passions Have Reached a Fever Pitch 137
Contents

Streams of Migration  138
Racial Conflict in The Postwar Era  144
The Suburban Exodus  150
The Rise of the Multiethnic Metropolis  158
Has the Urban Crisis Disappeared?  164

7 National Policy and the City/Suburban Divide  174
The Unintended Consequences of National Policies  174
   Outtake: Highway Programs Contributed to the Decline of the Cities  175
The Politics of Slum Clearance  176
How Local Politics Shaped Urban Renewal  177
Racial Segregation and “The Projects”  182
National Policy and Suburban Development  184
Suburbs, Highways, and the Automobile  192
The Damaging Effects of National Policies  196

8 Federal Programs and the Divisive Politics of Race  201
The Brief Life of Inner-City Programs  201
   Outtake: Racial Divisions Eventually Doomed Urban Programs  202
The Democrats and the Cities  203
The Republicans and the New Federalism  209
President Carter and the Democrats’ Last Hurrah  211
Republicans and the End of Federal Assistance  213
Political Reality and Urban Policy  217
The Cities’ Fall from Grace  219
The End of Urban Policy  221

9 The Rise of the Sunbelt  227
A Historic Shift  227
   Outtake: The Electoral College Favors the Sunbelt  228
The Concept of the Sunbelt  230
Regional Shifts  232
PART III  THE FRACTURED METROPOLIS

10 The Rise of the Fragmented Metropolis  252
Metropolitan Turf Wars  252
Outtake: There Is a Debate about Gated Communities  253
How the Suburbs Became Segregated  254
The Imperative of Racial Segregation  259
Walling Off the Suburbs: Incorporation  262
Walling Off the Suburbs: Zoning  266
The Challenge to Exclusionary Zoning  269
The New Face of Enclave Politics  272

11 Governing the Fragmented Metropolis  277
The Byzantine (Dis)Organization of Urban Regions  277
Outtake: The Costs of Sprawl Are Hotly Debated  278
The New Urban Form  280
The Concerns About Sprawl  282
A History of Metro Gov  287
The New Regionalism  292
Smart Growth  295
The New Urbanism  299
The Prospect for Reform  303

12 The Metropolitan Battleground  309
The Competition for Fiscal Resources  309
Outtake: Hundreds of Little Hoovers Make the Economic Crisis Worse  310
Cities in the U.S. Federal System  311
Where the Money Goes  313
Where the Money Comes From  319
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Municipal Bond Market</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rise of Special Authorities</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Gamesmanship</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>13 The Renaissance of the Metropolitan Center</strong></td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Unexpected Recovery of the Central Cities</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outtake: Baltimore’s Revival Is Debated</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Decline of Downtown</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalization and the Downtown Renaissance</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Urban Culture</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism and Entertainment</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old and New Downtowns</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 Governing the Divided City</strong></td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Delicate Balancing Act</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outtake: Multiethnic Coalitions Are Hard to Keep Together</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Recent Revolution in Urban Governance</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Benefits of Incorporation</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Striking a Balance</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Decisive Turning Point</td>
<td>388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Racial and Ethnic Future</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15 City and Metropolis in the Global Era</strong></td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Politics in a Time of Change</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New (but Actually Old) Growth Politics</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Delicate Art of Urban Governance</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Politics of the Patchwork Metropolis</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first edition of *City Politics* was published in 1979, and since that time the book has undergone changes as profound as the subject matter with which it deals. To keep it current and relevant, we have always taken care to describe significant new developments both in the “real world” and in the literature of the field; in this ninth edition, for example, we include material on the recent debates over immigration policy, voting rights, the continued fiscal problems that cities face, and the urban impacts of inequality. In making these changes, we have included enough citations so that students will be able to conduct further research of their own.

Over the years, *City Politics* has been used in college courses at all levels, from community colleges to graduate courses in research universities. *City Politics* has reached across disciplines, too; it has found its way into courses in urban politics, urban sociology, urban planning, urban geography, and urban history. We have relied upon three elements to make it relevant to such a broad audience: a strong and original thematic structure with a blending of the vast secondary literature with primary sources and recent scholarly materials, new data, and our own original research. To make the complex scholarship of the field as accessible and interesting as possible, we build the book around an admittedly sweeping narrative. As far as possible, each chapter picks the story up where the previous one left off, so that the reader can come to appreciate that urban politics in America is constantly evolving; in a sense, past and present are always intermingled.

Three threads compose the narrative structure of the book. From the nation’s founding, a devotion to the present, the private marketplace and a tradition of democratic governance have acted as the twin pillars of American culture. All through the nation’s history, cities have been forced to strike a balance between the goal of achieving local economic prosperity and the task of negotiating among the many contending groups making up the local polity. An enduring tension between these two goals is the mainspring that drives urban politics in America, and it is also at the center of the narrative that ties the chapters of this book together.

The governmental fragmentation of urban regions provides a third dynamic element that has been evolving for more than a century. A complete account of American urban politics must focus upon the internal dynamics of individual cities and also upon the relationships among the governmental units making up urban regions. Today, America’s urban regions are fragmented into a patchwork of separate municipalities and other governmental units. With the rise of privatized gated communities in recent decades, this fragmentation has become even more complicated. In several chapters of this edition of *City Politics*, we trace the many consequences that flow from this way of organizing political authority in the modern metropolis.
We divide the book into three parts. Part I is composed of five chapters that trace the history of urban America in the first long century from the nation’s founding in 1789 through the Great Depression of the 1930s. This “long century” spans a period of time in which the cities of the expanding nation competed fiercely for a place in the nation’s rapidly evolving economic system. At the same time, cities were constantly trying to cope with the social tensions and disruptions caused by wave after wave of immigration and a constant movement from farm to city. These tensions played out in a struggle between an upper- and middle-class electorate and working-class newcomers. The New Deal of the 1930s brought the immigrants and the cities they lived within into the orbit of national politics for the first time in the nation’s history, with consequences that reverberated for decades.

In Part II, we trace the arc of twentieth-century urban politics. Over a period of only a few decades, the old industrial cities went into a steep decline, the suburbs prospered, and a regional shift redistributed population away from the industrial belt to other parts of the country. For a long time, urbanization had been driven by the development of an industrial economy centered in a few great cities. But the decline of industrial jobs and the rise of a service economy profoundly restructured the nation’s politics and settlement patterns; as a result, by the mid-twentieth century the older central cities were plunged into a social and economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. In the years after World War II, millions of southern blacks poured into northern cities, a process that incited a protracted period of social unrest and racial animosity that fundamentally reshaped the politics of the nation and of its urban regions. Affluent whites fled the cities, carving out suburban enclaves in an attempt to escape the problems of the metropolis. The imperative of governance—the need to find ways of brokering among the contending racial, ethnic, and other interests making up the urban polity—became crucially important.

Part III of the text focuses on the urban politics produced by the deindustrialization and globalization processes of the 1980s and beyond. The emergence of a globalized economy is one of its defining features. Older central cities and entire urban regions that had slipped into decline began to reverse their fortunes by becoming major players in the post-industrial economy. At the same time, the fragmentation within metropolitan regions has taken on a new dimension because cities fiercely compete for a share of metropolitan economic growth. Today, central cities and their urban regions are more prosperous, but at the same time more fragmented than ever, and one consequence is that social and economic inequalities are being reproduced on the urban landscape in a patchwork pattern that separates urban residents.

These developments can best be appreciated by putting them into historical context. As in the past, urban politics continues to revolve around the two imperatives of economic growth and the task of governance. As in the nation’s first century, cities are engaged in a fierce competition for new investment. The great tide of immigration that took off in the nineteenth century shaped the politics of cities for well more than a century. The intense period of immigration that began in the 1970s has yet to run its course, and it, too, will reverberate
through all levels of the American political system for a long time to come. Any account of urban politics in the present era will be greatly enriched if we recognize that we are a nation of immigrants, and always have been. The several new features incorporated into this ninth edition include:

- A comprehensive discussion of the bitter debates over immigration policy
- An expanded discussion of the controversies over voting rights
- New material on the fiscal crisis that still faces many cities
- An expanded and updated discussion of minorities and urban governance
- An updated discussion of recent trends in inequality
- Incorporation throughout the text of recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau

Dennis R. Judd would like to thank Sam Bassett and Anahit Tadevosyan for their valuable research assistance and intellectual companionship. We also wish to thank Melissa Mashburn, our editor at Longman, for helping to keep the book on track.

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