

TH1.20.09 Theorizing Urban Political Change: Perspectives from American Political Development

Charting Change in the City: Urban Political Orders and Urban Political Development

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Cities are in a constant state of flux. Myriad changes—social, political, economic—can be identified at any particular time. But how might scholars differentiate between small-scale, fleeting changes and more substantial, decisive, and lasting change? This paper draws on the conceptual tools utilized in the subfield of American political development to argue the notion of urban political development—“durable shifts in government authority” (Orren and Skowronek, 2004)—can help scholars to identify major, politically consequential shifts that occur at the urban level. It will further argue that urban political development is driven by “intercurrent” clashes among competing urban political “orders,” which are understood as political coalitions, driven by overarching purposes (or ideas) and that capture control of governing institutions (Smith, 2006). Building on insights of urban scholars Clarence Stone (2015) and Joel Rast (2015), the aim of this paper is to reconceptualize urban change theoretically. I will illuminate this theoretical account with examples of urban austerity on the one hand, and the wave of local minimum wage ordinances on the other, and show how these important developments reflect underlying competition among neoliberal and progressive political orders respectively.

Urban Political Authority in Canada: Tracing the Political Development of the Western Canadian City

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Authors: Jack Lucas, University of Calgary

Scholars in the American Political Development (APD) tradition seek to identify and explain patterns of stability and change in the history of American political institutions and culture. Moments of “political development”, for APD scholars, represent “durable shifts in governing authority” -- moments in which the relationship among institutions, policy tasks, and political actors is fundamentally transformed. In this paper, I explore the long-term development of municipal political authority in four Western Canadian cities -- Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Winnipeg -- asking whether, and to what extent, the evolution of political authority in these cities can be organized into a larger story of urban political development.

Drawing on a novel data collection effort, in which I systematically identify “substantive authority shifts” in urban institutional structures and policy domains from the nineteenth century to the present, I begin by outlining the central types of authority migration that have occurred in each city over time. I demonstrate that genuine patterns of political development do appear in the data; however, the complexity of these patterns, and their variation across cities and policy domains, makes the APD concept of “intercurrence” essential for understanding the development of political authority in the urban context.

Looking Backwards; Rebuilding Explanations

Presenter: Heywood Sanders, University of Texas at San Antonio (heywood.sanders@utsa.edu)

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Speaking at the Social Science Research Council's April 1960 conference on metropolitan political leadership, Robert Dahl summarized the findings of his study of community leadership in New Haven. Contending that "The complexity and functional specialization of institutions in the contemporary community have resulted in a fragmented distribution of influence resources," Dahl emphasized the role of "the group of elected public officials who have ample resources and the skill and incentives to use them copiously and efficiently."

Dahl's "decisional" focus, embodied in *Who Governs?*, was clearly on the public officials who occupied the most visible, overt political positions in New Haven, most notably Mayor Richard Lee. Yet there is evidence in the memos prepared by then-graduate student Ray Wolfinger for Dahl that city officials clearly recognized the central role and influence of some New Haven business institutions and their leaders: "As I indicated earlier today, they [Mayor Lee and his staff] did contact some people in the [redevelopment] area and perhaps outside of the area, such as Malley's and the First National Bank. Taylor [executive director of the Redevelopment Agency] said this was essential, that they had to deal with what he called the 'power structure' if they wanted to accomplish anything."

This paper will examine the role of New Haven's business community in setting the agenda and developing support for the programs implemented by Mayor Lee, and reconsider the New Haven experience in light of contemporary urban politics.

How Policy Paradigms Change: Lessons from Chicago's Urban Renewal Program

Presenter: Joel Rast, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (jrast@uwm.edu)

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Scholars of American political development have paid growing attention to the role of ideas in political development. In a challenge to rationalist, materialist accounts of political behavior, ideational scholars have argued that the ideas actors hold about their interests, rather than interests alone, may play a key role in shaping political preferences and behavior. One type of idea that may function in this way is what Peter Hall (1993) and others have termed a policy paradigm. Policy paradigms are shared conceptual frameworks through which actors understand societal problems and develop solutions. Serving as a kind of policy lens, paradigms allow actors to "see" some types of potential policy solutions but not others. As such, they represent a potentially significant constraint on behavior. While paradigms change and evolve, the mechanisms through which this occurs are not well understood. Using evidence from Chicago's urban renewal program, I identify a set of factors endogenous to the policy process that led to transformative change in the policy paradigm for addressing the problem of slums and blighted areas.