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BIG CITY POLITICS

A comparative guide to the political systems of **ATLANTA** **BOSTON**

DETROIT **EL PASO**

LOS ANGELES **MIAMI**

PHILADELPHIA

ST. LOUIS **SEATTLE**

EDWARD C. BANFIELD

Harvard University



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Big City Politics

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EDWARD C. BANFIELD

HARVARD UNIVERSITY



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This book has an author in the sense that one person decided on its plan, put its language in final form, and takes responsibility for everything in it. In another sense, however, it has nine authors and an editor-compiler. The principal source of each chapter was a report in the series published by the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. The author wishes to express his appreciation to the authors of these reports (they are listed below) and to the Joint Center for its generous support of this undertaking. Appreciation is also due Mark K. Adams, Martha Derthick, and Mitchell Grodzins, who gave editorial assistance. Information to supplement the Joint Center reports on some points was obtained by the author through interviews with politicians in Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, El Paso, and Los Angeles. Additional information was obtained through interviews conducted by students and from published sources; to the student volunteers (also listed below) particular thanks are due. Obviously the authors of the original reports cannot be held responsible for a product that has passed through so many hands; the author assumes sole responsibility for it.

In the following listing, the name of the author of the Joint Center report is given immediately after the name of the city.

Atlanta. Kenneth E. Gray. Mr. Gray was prevented from completing his report on Atlanta; however, his notes were the principal source of the chapter that appears here. Wayne Kelley and Raleigh Bryans provided additional information. See also M. Kent Jennings, *Community Influentials*, The Free Press of Glencoe, New York, 1964; Jack L. Walker, "Protest and Negotiation: A Case Study of Negro Leadership in Atlanta, Georgia," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, VII (May, 1963); Seymour Freedgood, "Life in Buckhead," *Fortune*, September, 1961; James L. Townsend,

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"What Sort of a Mayor?," *Atlanta Magazine*, January, 1962, and Eugene Patterson, "The Making of a Mayor," *Atlanta Magazine*, November, 1963.

Boston. The Joint Center report was the product of a graduate seminar at Harvard and was edited by E. C. Banfield and Martha Derthick. A section of this report by Peter Brastrup dealing with the Boston press appeared in abbreviated form in *Harper's*, October, 1960.

Detroit. David Greenstone. See also Tom Nicholson, "Detroit's Surprising Mayor," *Harper's*, December, 1963.

El Paso. Mark and Gertrude Adams.

Los Angeles. James Q. Wilson. See also James Phelan, "Trouble in Happyland," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 25, 1963; Charles G. Mayo, "The Mass Media and Campaign Strategy in a Mayoralty Election," *Journalism Quarterly*, 41:3 (Summer 1964) and "The 1961 Mayoralty Election in Los Angeles: The Political Party in a Nonpartisan Election," *The Western Political Quarterly*, XVII:2 (June 1964), and *The Los Angeles Newsletter*.

Miami (Dade County). Edward Sofen. Clarence Jones provided additional information.

Philadelphia. Robert L. Freedman. William A. Humenuk provided additional information. See also James Reichley, *The Art of Government: Reform and Organization Politics in Philadelphia*, Fund for the Republic, New York, 1959.

Seattle. Charles W. Bender. Charles L. Jackson and David D. Tripple provided additional information.

St. Louis. Kenneth E. Gray. Leonard Strauss, Jr. provided additional information. See also Robert H. Salisbury, "St. Louis Politics: A Note on Relationships Among Interests, Parties, and Governmental Structure," *Western Political Quarterly*, June, 1960, and "The Dynamics of Reform: Charter Politics in St. Louis," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, August, 1961. Also H. J. Schmandt, P. G. Steinbicker, and G. D. Wendel, *Metropolitan Reform in St. Louis*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1962.

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Chapter 1</i> Atlanta: Strange Bedfellows	18
<i>Chapter 2</i> Boston: The New Hurrah	37
<i>Chapter 3</i> Detroit: Balancing Act	51
<i>Chapter 4</i> El Paso: Two Cultures	66
<i>Chapter 5</i> Los Angeles: Pre (Civil) War	80
<i>Chapter 6</i> Miami (Dade County): Yes, But . . .	94
<i>Chapter 7</i> Philadelphia: Nice While It Lasted	107
<i>Chapter 8</i> St. Louis: Better Than She Should Be	121
<i>Chapter 9</i> Seattle: Anybody in Charge?	133
<i>Index</i>	147



Big City Politics

Introduction

The obstacles in the way of solving city problems (insofar as "solutions" exist) are mainly political. Slums, racial injustice, traffic congestion, inadequate schools, air pollution—there is not an item on the whole familiar list that is a problem solely, or even primarily, for lack of resources, technical knowledge, or organization. In each case the main thing that stands in the way of remedial action is conflict. People's interests and opinions differ, and therefore they disagree about what, if anything, is to be done. Politics is the process by which conflict is carried on in matters of public concern, and the political system of a city is the set of formal and informal arrangements (laws, offices, interest groups, voting procedures, and so on) by which a public, or those who act for it, decide—or, it may be, fail to decide—what is to be done. It follows, then, that anyone interested in the problems of the cities ought also to be interested in the way their political systems work.

These systems differ greatly from city to city, and very few have been comprehensively described in print.¹ If one goes to the city hall or public library, one can usually get the principal facts about the legal structure of a city's government—what the elective offices are, how to get on the ballot, how many votes in council are necessary to override the mayor's veto, and the like. But if one cannot do this, it is often not easy to get such simple facts. There is no central place where they are collected for all cities or even for all large ones. And if one wants to go beyond the simple facts to find out how the system "really works," there is often no

¹ A notable exception is Wallace Sayre and William Kaufman, *Governing New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1960).

way of getting the information short of going to politicians and others who know and asking them, and this under some circumstances may be practically impossible. Suppose, for example, that one wants to know whether the mayor of a certain city is able to push large undertakings through the city council. One cannot very well call him long distance to ask, and even if one did call him, it would probably be hard to evaluate his answer—if he gave one. Where, then, does one go to get such questions answered?

As an assistance to persons doing research on urban problems, the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University for several years published in mimeographed form a series of reports on the politics of about twenty-five of the largest cities (excluding New York, Chicago, and a few others) which it distributed to about 200 public libraries, college and university libraries, and research institutes. Some of the reports were much more voluminous than others, but all contained similar information and all were organized in the same way. In most instances the reports were written by graduate students. All the authors supplemented documentary sources with interviews. A considerable number of politicians, newspapermen, civic association professionals, and professors contributed information. Each report was checked for accuracy by three local authorities before its publication.

The chapters that follow are essentially condensations of some of these reports. In each case some additional information has been added (several of the original reports were several years old when the condensations were made) and some changes of interpretation have been made. Therefore the author, while acknowledging his indebtedness to the authors of the reports, takes full responsibility for what appears here. Whereas the purpose of the reports was to provide raw and semi-digested data for the use of research workers, teachers, and students, that of the present volume is to give the general reader a compact, informative account of how certain local political systems work.

The idea is to describe what is normal or typical about the political system of a city. For this reason, what newspa-

permen call "color" and "human interest" has been deliberately excluded. If the mayor is a cigar-chewing Episcopalian, that fact is not recorded here unless being (or not being) a cigar-chewing Episcopalian has something to do with the normal operation of the political system. By the same token, the personalities and issues that are in the headlines today are not of interest here except as they exemplify the normal working of the system, that is, its tendency over time and in a variety of cases. Most people who write books about politics like to claim that their subjects are topical. Here, the opposite claim is made; to the extent that it succeeds in its purpose, this book is *not* topical, or is only incidentally so. It deals with current events only to reveal the relatively unchanging features of the various political systems—to use the phrase loosely, their equilibrium position.

If the reader wonders how anyone can decide what are and what are not the "normal" features of a political system, the answer is: by guesswork. The very notion of a political system involves guesswork. One guesses that by taking account of certain features of the situation and ignoring others one can formulate explanations of what has happened and predictions of what will happen. If the predictions prove correct, one assumes that the guesses were good ones. If one already *knew* precisely what had to be taken into account, it would be because one already had all the answers, in which case of course there would have been no need to construct a theory or to make and test predictions.

The guesswork is not entirely blind, however. There exists a certain amount of theory, some of it in some sense scientific but most of it hardly more than common sense, that tells one which features of a situation must be taken into account (it very rarely tells one just *how* to take them into account, however) and which can safely be ignored. No one would doubt, for example, that the presence in a city of large numbers of Negroes is likely to make a difference in its politics. Nor would one doubt that the number of left-handed people in the city is of no interest. For an account of the theories on the basis of which most of the material in this book was selected, the reader is referred to *City Politics*, a study which analyzes, along with much other material, the reports that

are here condensed.² Incidentally, readers who want explanations of terms like "city charter," "nonpartisanship," and "machine" will find them there.

In order to facilitate comparisons, the material in the following chapters is organized on a common plan. After an introductory paragraph, each chapter begins with a few essential facts about the characteristics of the city's population and economic base. (For convenience in making comparisons, some of these facts are brought together in a table at the end of this introduction, pages 16-17.) The next section describes briefly the formal organization of the city government. But since there is usually a good deal of difference between the way things are "supposed" to be done and the way they actually are done, the next section tells how the formal arrangements are supplemented or modified by informal ones. The following section explains how candidates are nominated and elected and how in general the electoral system operates. Then come a few paragraphs about the part that certain interest groups and influentials—business, labor, minority groups, and the press—play in the politics of the city. The last section of each chapter is a brief case study intended to show how the elements of the political system fit together and work. The idea here is to set the system in motion, so to speak, in order to see what sort of policy outcome it will produce.

What can be learned from a comparison of the nine very different political systems described in this book?

One would like to be able to show how particular causes produce particular effects. If one could trace out *several* links in a causal sequence, that would be especially satisfying. Thus, one might begin by showing how certain "starting place" characteristics of a city, such as its size, rate of growth, economic function, rate of home ownership, or the class or ethnic composition of its population exert a causal influence on the form and style of its government. (By "form and style" is meant whether the electoral system is partisan or nonpartisan, whether the office of mayor is

² Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, *City Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

strong or weak, whether the city council is elected on a ward basis or at large, whether the system is centralized or decentralized, and so on.) A second link might be established by showing the causal connections between form and style on the one hand and the content of the city government's policy on the other hand. What difference does it make in terms of the substance of policy that the city elects its mayor on a nonpartisan basis? Do city governments headed by nonpartisan mayors undertake more or less (of what sorts of things?) than city governments headed by partisan ones? Are nonpartisan governments more or less prone to serve special interests (which ones?), and are they more or less prone to corruption or inefficiency? A third link might be established by showing a causal connection between the content of city government policy and the quality of life in the city. One would like to know, for example, whether having an enterprising city government makes the city grow faster, leads to better race relations, or raises the general standard of living.

The reader who tries to formulate general statements along these lines will be tantalized by what he finds in the chapters that follow. He will find some cause-and-effect relations that clearly hold for one or two cities. But when he looks for the same effects from what appear to be the same causes in other cities he is likely to be disappointed.

The difficulty of generalizing along the lines that have just been suggested becomes apparent as soon as one tries to relate "starting place" characteristics—for example, the class character of the city—to the form and structure of government. Philadelphia and St. Louis, two cities with relatively small proportions of white-collar employees and (by non-Southern standards) large proportions of low-income families, have partisan electoral systems and the mayors of both cities are to a considerable extent dependent upon the cooperation of machine bosses. Can we conclude that other cities with similarly constituted populations will have governments that exhibit about the same form and structure? Alas, no. Detroit and Boston, which are much like Philadelphia and St. Louis in the two population characteristics mentioned, both have nonpartisan governments. Detroit, indeed,

has long been as much of a "good government" city as Seattle, which has the highest proportion of white-collar employees and the lowest proportion of low-income families of any large city in the United States. It is perhaps not hard to find at least a partial explanation of the anomaly represented by Detroit and Boston: the present form of government is in both cases a heritage that a middle-class elite thrust upon the city before losing power. But why did not the same thing happen in Philadelphia and St. Louis, for these cities also were once ruled by middle-class elites? And why have not Detroit and Boston returned to partisan politics in the years that have elapsed since the middle-class elites lost their power?

Effects that seem to be the same, moreover, may prove to be very different when examined closely. Detroit and Boston, for example, are alike in that they elect their city councils on an at-large basis. But this similarity turns out to be of rather trivial importance, for in Detroit (perhaps because that city is so much larger) a councilman represents a constellation of interest groups, whereas in Boston he is on his own as a "personality." Although formally the same with respect to what one would think could be an important structural feature, the Detroit council plays a different and much more constructive part in the formation of policy than its Boston counterpart.

When one tries to show how the form and style of a city government influence the content of policy the difficulties increase. The task is impossible if one makes the mistake of thinking that what matters most is whether the electoral system is partisan or nonpartisan. All but two of the political systems described in this book are nonpartisan, and the differences in the policies of these seven nonpartisan city governments are in some respects considerable. The structural feature that has the most to do with policy, perhaps, is the degree to which governmental power is centralized. It is not enough that a high degree of centralization be provided by law, however. Miami Metro is an example of a government which, from a purely legal standpoint, is highly centralized; but those who have legal authority do not have much extra-legal influence to go with it, and Metro is there-

fore more form than substance. As the case of Atlanta shows, one can have a city government which from a purely legal standpoint is rather decentralized, but which is in fact highly centralized through the working of extra-legal arrangements. Or, again, one can have cities where ample legal authority is joined with substantial extra-legal influence, thus producing a centralization that is unusually predictable in its operation. Detroit and Philadelphia are examples. That the mayors of these two cities have great formal *and* informal power is far more important in its effect on policy than that one city is nonpartisan and the other partisan. To see this, one need only compare the range and character of the city government undertakings in Detroit and Philadelphia with those in two other cities (both nonpartisan) whose mayors conspicuously lack both formal and informal power, Los Angeles and Seattle.

It would be nice if we could take the per capita level of general expenditure in a city as a measure of the city government's willingness and ability to get things done. On that basis Boston would have by far the most effective government of any large city in the United States. Unfortunately, the expenditure figures cannot be used in this way. For one thing, it is not at all clear that they measure even approximately the same thing from city to city. (A function that gets state aid in one city may not get it in another, for example.) But even if they did measure the same thing, it would not follow that a high level of expenditure would reflect "effectiveness" in a city government. It might represent that, of course. But it might also represent waste. (Perhaps Boston's level of expenditure is high mainly because Mayor Collins has not been able to eliminate all of the pay-rollers who were given jobs by Mayor Curley.) Or, again, the level of expenditure might be low because the problems a city has to cope with are relatively simple (it costs less to provide fire protection for new brick buildings than for old wooden ones, for example) or because the income and tastes of the citizens favor a low level. This may explain why Atlanta, a city with a strong mayor, has such a low level of expenditure; it does not *necessarily* explain it, however, for the level of expenditure in Seattle, the city with the highest

