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CITY POLITICS

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JAMES Q. WILSON

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We have made extensive use of the approximately thirty reports of the politics of particular cities that have been published in mimeographed form by the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. References to these reports appear here and there in the text, but our reliance upon them has been more extensive than the footnotes indicate. We wish to acknowledge a general debt to the authors of these reports and to the Joint Center, which sponsored them and aided us as well. Martin Meyerson, its director until July 1963, was both a lively critic and a patient friend.

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INTRODUCTION · A POLITICAL APPROACH TO URBAN GOVERNMENT

THIS BOOK is based on the view that the day-to-day workings of city government in the United States are best understood by looking at the differences of opinion and interest that exist within the cities, at the issues that arise out of these differences, and at the ways institutions function to resolve (or fail to resolve) them. It is based, in short, upon a view of city government as a political process.

This is not the usual approach to the subject. City government is usually treated more as a matter of "administration" than of "politics." Those who write about it are, as a rule, more concerned with legal arrangements than with the informal devices by which things are actually done, more with the activities of appointed officials (bureaucrats) than with those of elected ones (politicians), and more with the procedures by which routines are carried on than with the large forces that determine the content of policy.

We have reversed the usual emphasis because we think the nature of American government requires it. In many other countries, it might be possible to identify some sphere—often a large one—that is almost purely "administrative," in the sense that matters are decided, as Max Weber said, according to rule and without regard to persons. But in the United States there is no such sphere. Our government is permeated with politics. This is because our constitutional structure and our traditions afford individuals manifold opportunities not only to bring their special interests to the attention of public officials but also—and this is the important thing—to compel officials to bargain and to make compromises. The nature of the governmental system gives private interests such good opportunities to participate in the making of public decisions that there is virtually no sphere of "administration" apart from politics.

To say that the government of American cities is to a high degree political does not necessarily mean that decisions are made on partisan grounds or by people who are called, or who think of themselves as, politicians. To be sure, many decisions *are* political in the rather nar-

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row sense. But many equally important ones are made without regard to party or to electoral considerations and are made by people who are professional administrators. These decisions are nevertheless political. The governmental system affords special interests the opportunity to impose checks on administrators in much the same way that they impose them on politicians; and therefore administrators, even those of them who regard "politics" with abhorrence, are normally obliged to be responsive to the demands of special interests.

If the governments of American cities are political, so are the problems of the cities, and this, we think, is another reason for approaching the study of city government by way of politics. To the extent that social evils like crime, racial hatred, and poverty are problems susceptible to solution, the obstacles in the way of their solution are mostly political. It is not for lack of information that the problems remain unsolved. Nor is it because organizational arrangements are defective. Rather it is because people have differing opinions and interests, and therefore opposing ideas about what should be done.

In the United States, the connection between local and national politics is peculiarly close. This is a further reason why the study of city politics is important. The national parties, except for a few months every four years when they come alive to elect a President and Vice-President, are hardly more than loose congeries of local parties. Congressmen and Senators are essentially local politicians, and those of them who forget it soon cease to be politicians at all. One cannot understand the national political system without knowing something about how it works locally.

Another reason for studying city politics is that it affords exceptional opportunities to generalize about American political culture, American democracy, and democracy in general. The most important questions—the question of peace or war, for example—do not arise in city politics, to be sure. That city politics is never played for the highest stakes makes it in some ways an entirely different game. Nevertheless, the similarities are great enough so that one can learn something about the greater game from studying the lesser, and the large number of cities affords unique opportunities for comparison. There are only a few democratic nations, and all of them differ radically in culture. But there are several hundred democratic cities in the United States, and their culture is, broadly speaking, the same.

To say that city politics is worth studying for these reasons is not

to imply, however, that the spread of knowledge about city politics is likely to lead to the solution of local or national problems. Knowledge about politics may indeed help one side of a controversy to gain an advantage over its opponents, but there is no presumption that from a social standpoint this will make any improvement in the situation. To increase equally the knowledge of *all* sides would put the competition on a somewhat different basis without changing the structure of the situation essentially.

The kind of knowledge about politics that might give one side an advantage over the others, it must be added, can seldom be got from books. Moreover, it is not a kind of knowledge that is intellectually worthwhile; it consists not of general propositions but of facts about particular circumstances of time and place (e.g., that the alderman of the tenth ward will switch his vote on the park proposition if the mayor applies pressure) and of a mysterious faculty for making good guesses.

The reason why knowledge about politics (whether in the form of general propositions or as practical wisdom) will not lead to better solutions of social problems is that the impediments to such solutions are a result of disagreement, not lack of knowledge. Knowing how disagreements arise, how the parties to them act *vis-à-vis* each other, and the rules and practices by which certain institutions mediate them is not likely to be of use either in preventing disagreements from arising or in bringing them to quicker or more satisfactory resolution. Thinking that a general increase in the level of knowledge about politics will promote better and faster solutions of social problems is something like thinking that a general increase in the skill of chess players will lead to shorter games or to a "solution of the problem of chess."

At least two important practical purposes may be served by a wider diffusion of knowledge about politics, however.

First, young men and women who enter the civil service may, if they understand the setting in which they work and the constraints that the system imposes upon them, work more effectively and with less strain to themselves. A city planner, for example, may learn from the study of city politics to be more aware of the limitations upon him and more tolerant of them. This may help him to make plans that are more likely to be carried into effect.

Second, the spread of knowledge about politics may also reduce the amount of well-meant but often harmful interference by citizens in the workings of political institutions. A public which understands the na-

ture and necessity of politics may perhaps be more willing than one that does not to allow politicians to do their work without obstruction. Such a public may be more appreciative of the social value of the results of this work (but not necessarily more respectful of the motives of the people who do it; that is another matter). And it may be more aware of the risks it runs of damaging, or perhaps even of destroying, a tolerable system by attempting reforms the full effects of which cannot be foreseen.

The ultimate justification for the study of city politics, however, is certainly not a practical one. Perhaps the most intrinsically satisfying of man's activities is trying to understand the world he lives in. Politics, being one of the most difficult things to understand, is therefore particularly challenging. Responding to the challenge is, we think, its own justification and reward.

PART I

THE NATURE OF CITY POLITICS

