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1 Introduction to the Study of Local Politics

Why We Bother and How We Go About It

You walk into a room where a meeting is in progress. A few of the participants glance at you as you enter; a few are too intent on the business at hand to notice you; most look bored and disinterested; several are reading. A voice is droning on over a loudspeaker. You find a seat and take in your surroundings. If you're in a large, old city, the room may seem a bit like a church, with people sitting in wooden pews facing the front of the room, where some more official-looking people in big chairs sit at desks, perhaps facing one another rather than their audience, which they may outnumber. If you're in a newer city, perhaps in the suburbs or the Sunbelt, the room will be modern and may seem more like a theater, with rows and rows of comfortable seats for the audience and a small group of official types at desks and in padded chairs that swivel, but facing the audience rather than one another.

The official-looking people sitting in the front are mostly men and mostly white. The one who looks most important and official of all sits in the middle and seems to be running the show. Nearby, perhaps below or to one side of the official group, are people shuffling papers or taking notes. Also beneath or to one side of the group is a podium from which a man in a suit is addressing them, his back to the audience. His, you now discern, is the voice on the loudspeaker. Some of the official types seem to be listening to him, but others are whispering to each other, talking on the phone, pouring themselves coffee, reading, or seemingly having an out-of-body experience. The speaker concludes with some ingratiating remarks, and the official in the middle thanks him and calls on one of the paper-shufflers at a nearby desk. Referring to a report of some sort, this person speaks quickly, using many unfamiliar words and phrases. Then one of the important-acting officials mutters something and the presider rattles out, "All-in-favor-all-opposed-motion-approved-the-next-item-is-18c." A few people leave the room looking pleased; others seem to wake up.

Another jargon-spouting official reports, one of the people at the top table gives a mini-lecture, and a succession of people line up behind the podium. You understand that item 18c involves a housing development. The first speakers, all in suits, proclaim its economic benefits and its contribution to solving your community's dire housing shortage. You are sympathetic. Then, one after the other, people who seem to be average citizens speak. They turn out to be residents of neighborhoods near the proposed development. Unlike the earlier speakers, they are nervous. They do not

use jargon and they sometimes seem a little vague, but they make clear their worries about the project's impact on traffic, schools, and other local services. Some decry the loss of open space and ask for the land to be made into a park. You are sympathetic until some declare that they fear that the "type of people" who might live in the new housing would decrease property values and lead to the deterioration of their neighborhoods. If the proposed condominiums would really cost $350,000, as their developer announced, you suspect it would be people like your own family who might buy them. When the speakers conclude, the officials debate the issue briefly. One or two clearly play to the audience; others seem indifferent. Another quick vote is taken and the housing is approved. The men in suits leave smiling. The more casually dressed people seem bewildered at first, then straggle out grumbling and frowning, glancing disgustedly back at the officials up front. One comes down to walk out with them, pursing her lips and shaking her head.

"Item 19a," announces the front-and-center official and another paper-shuffler mutters a report, halting abruptly when the doors burst open and a television camera crew sweeps in led by someone in heavy makeup and hair that doesn't move. Blinding lights suddenly bathe the chamber. The person making the report stutters to continue, and all of the important-acting officials now sit up straight and look attentive and concerned. A couple of rumpled-looking people sitting at a table to one side and writing in funny little notebooks smirk. As the made-up person directs the camera, a new set of speakers queues up at the podium. This time they are elderly and gray haired, and you gather that the officials are about to take something away from them. But before they begin their speeches, the bright lights fade, the TV crew sweeps out, and everybody slumps, looking dazed and disappointed. Meanwhile, a group of police officers in uniform enters the room and sits together, right in front.

You've got an early class the next day, so you make your way out, noticing that you could have picked up a printed agenda at the door. You're surprised to find a crowd in the hall. Some people are talking angrily; you recognize them from the housing debate. A couple of men in suits are huddled with one of the important-looking officials. Some average-citizen types are walking in wearing yellow "Save Our" something-or-other pins.

Mulling it over on the way home, you are surprised that although it seemed boring while you were sitting through it, what you observed now seems sort of interesting, even a little exciting. You've just witnessed a bit of local politics at work: a city council or county board with its mayor or chairperson and supporting bureaucracy along with lobbyists and citizens and a reporter or two. The process, the people, and even the room and building (grand and intimidating or comfortable and accessible) reveal a lot about local government and politics. After another meeting or two, you will discern organizational structures and an operating style. You'll figure out which people, interests, and values have clout. If you go to enough meetings, you'll see most of the elements of local politics in action—elected officials, bureaucrats, interest groups and lobbyists, the media, and sometimes even important members of the local business elite. You may sense the abstract presence of the voters or the public, especially around elections. You'll hear talk of taxes and budgets, of economic de-

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velopment, social issues and services, regional problems, and relations with state and federal governments.

Such meetings will not tell you all you need to know about local politics, but they are a pretty good starting place. They can help you generate questions about how your local politics works and can connect the things you learn about in class to the real world. If you study other communities, you'll find that for all their differences, they have much in common with your own.

IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Have you ever been to a city council meeting? (If not, go to one!) What kinds of issues were discussed and what groups were represented? How were the issues resolved?

Why Study Local Politics?

The most practical reason to study local politics is that it affects us all every day, from what happens when we flush the toilet to life in our neighborhoods, to getting along with one another, personal safety, jobs, schools, traffic on our streets, and even the air we breathe. Yet as much as it affects us, few of us understand how local politics works or how to make it work for us.

The foiling of an international terrorist plot receives more media attention and may seem more glamorous, but international or even national politics rarely touch us as immediately or directly as do events at the local level. The glamour of a movie-star governor in California or a cliffhanger presidential election may grab our attention, but since most of us do not live in our state capitals or in Washington, DC, the action is too far away for us to observe in person. Modern media, with cable channels like C-SPAN and with the Internet, are changing that, but for the most part we still have to rely on intermediaries to pass on information and impressions to us. As excellent as they may be, journalists and editors (and even Web bloggers) filter information and interpret it for us. In your own community, however, you can be your own reporter. You can go see for yourself, actually talk to the participants, and learn the ropes of politics by "doing." Sheer proximity makes studying local politics a worthwhile endeavor, and many of the lessons we learn can be applied to all levels of politics. As the saying goes, in a very real way, all politics is local.

At first glance, local matters such as a zoning change may seem mundane, even trivial. Some are. But just as often, the controversies, politics, and personalities surrounding a zoning change can be compelling and dramatic. Either way, they affect us too intimately to dismiss or leave to others. Moreover, acting as individuals or as part of an **interest group**, our ability to influence local politics far exceeds our power to shape events at the state or national level. One of the first surprises for students of local politics is learning how few players actually participate and how easy, with a little *chutzpah*, it is to become one—particularly if you are someone who understands how the game is played. As an informed participant in the local political

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process, you can develop, in a relatively short period of time, knowledge and expertise on issues that few others in the community have.

We should not, however, fixate on just one community. This is a common pitfall in studying politics at all levels. In studying only one city or "case" there is a tendency to assume that its dynamics will more or less resemble politics elsewhere. This may or may not be true. The solution to this dilemma is fairly simple: compare. The feasibility of such comparison makes local politics an excellent subject of study, in some ways better than national or even state politics, which is limited to only fifty states. In contrast, some metropolitan areas alone contain hundreds of local governments, so you don't even need to go far away to begin making comparisons. The sheer number of local political jurisdictions creates other problems—which we will discuss later—but for now, the basic point is that **comparison** allows us to avoid the "tunnel vision" that comes from studying only one community.

Comparison also enables us to develop generalizations or **theories**, not only about local politics, but about politics and political behavior at all levels. Building theories about human behavior is not easy, but there is a method to the madness. First, researchers make **observations** and then hypotheses (educated guesses) about how and why human events happen. Next, they gather data or evidence to test their hypotheses. If their hypotheses are confirmed, the process moves on to the development of a theory, or a model for explaining how something works. Ultimately, the purpose of theories is to predict what might happen in similar cases. Again, it isn't enough to look at just one community or tell a story about a particular event, as a journalist does. One of our goals is to look at many communities or events and try to discern patterns among them in order to arrive at useful, **predictive generalizations**.

So what kinds of things might we study and begin to make hypotheses about? We can study the relative influence of different individuals and groups and their influence on what issues make it onto the agenda, what alternatives are considered, and, ultimately, how issues are decided and implemented. We might seek to understand why and under what conditions groups form alliances, or **coalitions**, with one another to affect policy decisions. We could also consider the impact of government structures or a city's social psychology, which we will discuss later, in producing a particular political outcome. We might study the impact of age, class, ethnicity, education, or even geography on why groups vote the way they do. Again, whether we are studying power relations, political institutions, voting behavior, or something else, it is through comparison with other cases that the most useful conclusions are reached.

Finally, comparison has a more practical utility as well. In addition to building theories, comparison is also a critical tool in solving practical problems facing urban areas—one of the most important skills we hope you will learn from this book. Whether you are interested in finding ways to save on street maintenance, improve the delivery of services, or more effectively incorporate residents into the decision-making process, comparison opens our eyes to solutions to problems that we might not have thought of on our own. Often called "best practices research," one of the first places to look in solving everyday problems is to study how similar problems have been dealt with in other cities.

In short, the larger goal of comparison is to better understand politics and find

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better solutions to problems. But your own community is still the best starting point. Think of it as the frog you dissected in biology lab. You cut up one frog, not to learn only about that frog but to learn about frogs and anatomy in general. Your frog was unique, as are all living creatures and communities, but its anatomy had a lot in common with other frogs and creatures, so you learned about them, too. Remember, though, that unlike that frog, the communities we're going to study are very much alive. They may change as we study them. Who knows, the results of your study might even change them!

Know Your "City Limits"

As a budding practitioner of local politics, one of the things that can set you apart is to become one of the few who truly understand "the big picture." In order to practice the art of what is possible in city politics, we need to begin with an understanding of several important limitations that face cities and other local governments. Local politics is somewhat unique in that it is subnational and largely subordinate to other levels of politics and to larger economic and social forces. Although there is significant debate on this point, some analysts think that these larger forces have now overwhelmed local politics, making them trivial or even irrelevant. Obviously, local politicians and many citizens disagree.

Subordinate Governments

For most of human history, there was no such thing as "a city." Until the advent of agriculture, human societies were transient, hunter-gather groups that followed food sources as they migrated or the weather changed. Early agricultural techniques changed everything, allowing societies to form more permanent settlements. As those settlements grew, they became what we think of today as cities, and those cities eventually became the center of political life. Some, like Athens or Rome, expanded and came to dominate great empires. Many others functioned as **city-states**—that is, as tiny, independent countries. Each was "sovereign," governing itself, making its own foreign policy, and raising an army to defend itself and its surrounding territory. Massive walls were essential to the defense of city-states. (That's why a lot of the ancient cities you may have visited in your travels had walls around them.) But when cannons were invented, the walls fell and so did the city-states. The modern equivalent of the city-state survives in a few places such as Singapore, San Marino, and maybe Hong Kong, but most of the great city-states of history have been absorbed into more economically efficient and militarily powerful "nation-states" that emerged in the past few centuries. In recent decades, a similar process has been underway in absorbing those nation-states into larger political and economic entities such as the European Union.

Like nations, politics in cities is therefore no longer self-contained, if it ever truly was. Rather, it is subnational and subordinate—dependent instead of independent. Some cities, like Rome, are older than the nations of which they are a part, yet they derive their right to exist from these now-superior authorities. In most countries,

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governmental authority is highly centralized, and local governments are essentially administrative agencies for the national or state government, where all real power lies, where the money comes from, and where most policy is made. In such countries, local politics is usually about choosing who gets to carry out national or provincial programs.

The United States is not nearly so centralized, making the study of politics in this country both interesting and somewhat unique. In the United States, power, authority, and responsibility for different programs and policies are divided between the national and state governments through our **federal system**. State governments, in turn, delegate some of their authority and responsibility to implement programs to city, county, and other local governments. States may delegate to local governments the power to police communities, decide land-use issues, tax, spend, decide on governmental structure, and much more—or less. The state's delegation of power may be broad and generous or narrow and restrictive, depending on state politics and the influence of local governments within it. Many local governments feel constrained by their subordinate and dependent status, yet despite this, local governments in the United States enjoy much greater autonomy, or **home rule**, than local governments in most other countries.

The history of the ebb and flow of local autonomy is quite interesting. The U.S. Constitution makes no mention at all of the status of local governments. Thus, until the early twentieth century, cities in the United States were largely left to their own devices to address their problems, and the decisions they made rarely had much significance outside their boundaries. At the end of the nineteenth century, as cities struggled mightily to cope with the tremendous challenges posed by **industrialization**, events at the local level began to assume wider economic and political importance. It soon became clear that cities required at least some greater regulatory authority to deal with complex issues such as sanitation, transportation, and other problems. British political writer James Bryce, observing the unfolding chaos in American cities in the late nineteenth century, famously observed: "The governance of its cities is the one chief failure of American democracy."[1] Initially, state governments began to grant local governments powers such as taxation and bonding authority to deal with the new challenges. However, those new powers also came with strings attached. It wasn't until the Progressive Era of the early 1900s and later events such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the postwar economic boom that state and federal governments began making more laws or programs that superseded or constrained those of local governments. In other words, if cities were going to have more power and influence, their corresponding state governments—largely dominated by rural interests—were going to make sure they were keeping the emerging power of cities in check.

Despite the general trend toward the erosion of home rule, in the early twentieth century the U.S. Supreme Court nonetheless gave cities the power to regulate land use. Also known as **zoning**, land-use decisions are still a primarily local power, but in the past few decades a plethora of state and federal environmental, planning, and other laws have eroded even this power, further limiting local authority. As a nation founded on principles of self-government, though, the American people cling tightly to their tradition of home rule.

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Nevertheless, the trend toward state and federal intervention has clearly been in the other direction. Local governments have now joined citizens in complaining about state and federal red tape and bureaucracy. Even the hiring or firing of their own employees is sometimes dictated by state and federal regulations on civil rights and affirmative action. Since the 1980s, local governments have been virtually stripped of most federal financial assistance. In some cases, state officials have literally raided the tax base of local governments to deal with crippling state budget crises. Aside from the usual political resistance to raising local taxes, state laws often restrict what kind and how much tax local governments can raise. In particular, the trend in some states toward funding local government operations with sales taxes rather than the more stable property tax has meant that when the national or state economies catch a cold, the locals catch pneumonia.

Besides these legal and fiscal constraints, state and federal politics and politicians often steal the spotlight. Their actions and their campaigns are seen as more glamorous and dramatic and often push local politics off center stage and sometimes right out of the theater. The decline, consolidation, and displacement of local media, with fewer newspapers and the dominance of television, have only added to this.

Capital Mobility

The power of economic forces, in particular **capital mobility**, places another important limit on the practice of local politics. Businesses provide jobs and tax revenues for communities. Without a viable local economy, communities can literally wither and die. Economic interests have therefore always exerted great influence on local politics. Often, alliances emerge between business and political leaders in the shared interest of economic development. Business leaders are often well represented in local office and usually have a major say in the organization of local governments, their powers, tax structures, and programs. The power of business interests comes from their wealth and their command over employees and associates, but it also comes from their prestige in a capitalist society and the manifest need of communities for the jobs and taxes they provide. When business speaks, government listens, and local government, with all of its constraints, pays the closest attention of all. Some analysts, such as Paul Peterson in his influential book *City Limits*,[2] believe that this economic logic best explains why keeping business happy is the predominant concern of local governments.[2]

Like the relationship between local, state, and national governments, relations with business have changed in recent years, and usually not to the advantage of local governments. Bigger government of the 1930s and 1960s was partly a response to bigger business and the emergence of a corporate capitalist economy. But businesses, even big ones, were once locally owned and operated. Their proprietors lived locally and were usually influential in local politics, even if they rarely held elected office. But today, the biggest businesses in most communities are now branch plants of national or multinational corporations. Except in the cities that host corporate headquarters, their owners (now usually shareholders rather than individuals or families) do not

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live locally. The company is represented by a CEO who probably has little connection to the community. These businesses usually take less interest in local politics than their home-grown predecessors, but when they do, their power is even more heavy-handed because their commitment to the community is clearly not as great.

Threats to move their plants to Mississippi, Mexico, or Malaysia if they don't get what they want are taken seriously. They probably wouldn't be in a particular community in the first place if they hadn't been promised just what they wanted. Local governments desperate to retain jobs and tax revenue often feel as much or more constrained by the decisions of large corporations as by those of state and federal governments. In the face of capital mobility, cities must leverage any and every advantage, such as location, climate, a skilled workforce, or even culture in bargaining with business, as urbanist Richard Florida argues.[3] Much like business corporations themselves, local governments have been forced to find creative strategies to carve out an economic niche in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Quite often, those strategies are centered around catering to the interests of increasingly mobile businesses.

In Your Community

List the advantages and disadvantages of your city. Think in terms of what is attractive to both business and residents.

Residential Mobility

As with the mobility of capital, cities must also remain attentive and responsive to the mobility of their residents. As a nation of immigrants, the American people have always been more mobile than, say, Europeans. In the past it was common for people to live cradle to grave in one community, working, raising families, going to school, shopping, and socializing. But most Americans don't live like that anymore. Like corporations, we'll go from city to city and state to state, in search of better jobs, schools, weather, or a particular quality of life. We even hop from city to city in our daily lives, living in one, working in another, and shopping and socializing in still others. We've become virtually temporary residents of our communities—if the places where we live even deserve that term—and have become more like consumers in an increasingly connected regional, and now global, economy. This isn't necessarily our fault, nor is it necessarily a bad thing—it's simply a fact of life in a modern corporate economy. As with strategies to retain, expand, or attract businesses, cities must promote policies and provide services that appeal to their residents. If the quality of life or services in a city drops below a certain level, as with businesses, residents may chose "exit" over "voice" or "loyalty"'[4] by moving to the next town (or state) where things are better. As with the need to cater to business, cities must also pay close attention to the needs of their residents. Thus, a key element of city politics is in striking the proper balance between providing for the needs of business and residents.

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Urban Fragmentation: Governing the "Crazy Quilt"

The pattern of our daily lives—pursuing different activities in different parts of a metropolitan area with different local governments—points to still another way that local politics is limited. Communities were once geographically separated from one another, each with its own government, self-contained and responsible for solving its own problems. As metropolitan areas have grown, communities now run into one another, and literally hundreds of local governments may operate in the same urban area, forming what many have called a "**crazy quilt**" of overlapping jurisdictions. One problem this creates is that while problems such as environmental contamination, traffic congestion, and housing shortages pay no heed to political boundaries, solutions to these problems require local governments to cooperate. It's a topic that we will return to in chapter 4 and again in the final chapter, but for now it's enough to know that the central problem this creates involves competition. In the chase for tax revenue or status, local governments compete with one another for industry, residents, or even professional sports franchises in ways that may not benefit the larger social good. Communities from well beyond a single urban area also join such competitions, further weakening local cooperation and undermining the stability and autonomy of local governments. In sum, the combined effects of the erosion of home rule, increased capital and **residential mobility**, and urban fragmentation pose tremendous challenges for American local governments.

What's Left for Local Governments?

All these "**city limits**" would seem to add up to a pretty gloomy picture. "The very heart and soul of local politics has surely died,"[5] laments political scientist Mark Gottdiener. Reduced to "form without content," he continues, "local politics has long since passed over into the hands of professional managers, multinational corporations, local capital caught in a predatory jungle of small business competition, provincial politicians making do on dwindling party resources, and certainly not least, federal interventions promulgated by the long series of crises befalling the country since the 1960s."[6]

Other analysts, such as Clarence Stone, strongly believe that local politics still matters and assert that the rigid economic determinism implied in the writings of Peterson and Gottdiener is overstated. Stone recognizes the impact of all the "structural constraints," such as state and federal laws, economic forces, and urban fragmentation, but insists that policy outcomes "are mediated through political arrangements," including the institutions and actors in local government. In other words, in Stone's view, cities and their politics still very much matter.[7]

Obviously, if we didn't agree that cities can still shape their future in meaningful ways, we wouldn't have bothered writing this textbook. But we also think it is more important than ever for practitioners of local politics to understand the nature and scope of the legal, economic, and institutional environment in which local governments must operate. In recognizing these important constraints, however, we also want to emphasize that local governments have a number of tools at their disposal to re-

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spond to political events, problems, and changing environments. In other words, despite constraints, cities still have choices. Will a city's police force behave like an occupying army or will it practice community policing? Will a city go for growth at all costs or risk losing some economic benefits to preserve its environment? Will a city provide services for the homeless or shuttle them out of town? Will it welcome economic, ethnic, and other forms of diversity or seek to be up-scale and exclusive? Will it cater to the automobile or promote alternative modes of transportation? And so on.

On these and other matters, local governments still make choices, which is what politics is all about. These choices may be diminished, narrowed, even trivialized or marginalized, but they still make a difference in how people live their daily lives, how they feel about where they live, and even whether or not they participate in community life and local politics. Even if only little things are left to the locals, these "little things" are often critical to a city's quality of life. But local governments still make big decisions, too, ranging from building subway systems and stadiums to schools and policing. Many of these decisions are bitterly fought over (albeit by a minority of residents), which is the best evidence of all that local politics still matters, at least to the locals.

Prophets of the city limits perspective do not necessarily disagree with this. They do not argue that local politics should be forsaken or ignored. But for our purposes, finding a definitive answer to whether local politics "matters" is less important than in understanding the larger political and economic environment in which twenty-first-century cities now operate. Moreover, the reasons for studying local politics discussed earlier, including its effects on us, its accessibility, and its utility as a learning lab, still stand.

A Practical Approach

We have chosen to approach the study of local politics from a practical perspective. We begin in Part I by considering the geographic, socioeconomic, demographic, and intergovernmental environment of local politics. We move on in Part II to the formal institutions, structures, and political process of local government. In Part III, we turn to system inputs, including voters, elections, the media, and interest groups. We also focus our attention on community power structures as a summary of all we studied before. Part IV takes us to some of the policy outputs of the political system, including local taxing and spending and public policy issues such as education, welfare, crime, transportation, and growth. Finally, we critically consider several proposals to reform America's large metropolitan regions with their multiple, overlapping local governments.

A few themes will run through our study. You can probably already guess what they are. One is power; another is the politics of growth, which is discussed more in the next chapter, which also introduces another recurrent theme: the distinctions, conflicts, and competition between central cities and suburbs and between communities in the Sunbelt and those in the Frostbelt. Above all, however, our approach will be practical, emphasizing the nuts and bolts of local political institutions and procedures. Our goal is for you to gain an understanding of politics in your own commu-

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nity, both as a student and as someone with a stake in the community. You should use your community and the others around you as a learning laboratory, testing what this book says against what you observe there and vice versa. You should also gain practical knowledge that will help you as a citizen participant in the politics of your own community. Remember, though, that our aim is not just to learn about local politics where we live, but to learn more generally, so that we know what questions to ask in order to understand local politics wherever we happen to live or visit.

Essential Terms

interest group
comparison
theories
observations
predictive generalizations
coalitions
city-states
federal system
home rule
industrialization
zoning
capital mobility
crazy quilt
residential mobility
city limits

On the Internet

- Go to your city and county websites and peruse them. When is the next meeting? What issues seem to be important to your community?
- www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm has a comprehensive list of Internet sites relating to state and local government.
- www.cyburbia.org/directory/ provides a clearinghouse for information on a wide range of urban policy areas.

Notes

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2. Paul E. Peterson, *City Limits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
3. Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
4. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).
5. Mark Gottdiener, *The Decline of Urban Politics: Political Theory and the Crisis of the Local State* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987), pp. 13–14.
6. Ibid., p. 14.
7. Clarence Stone, "The Study of the Politics of Urban Development," in *The Politics of Urban Development*, ed. Clarence N. Stone and Heywood T. Sanders (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), pp. 4, 12, 16, 17.

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