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## A Realistic Vision of a Just and Effective Urban Politics

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## A Realistic Vision of a Just and Effective Urban Politics

Cities periodically emerge as the primary seedbeds in the federal system for public policy innovation. At the turn of the last century the Progressive movement began in the cities as a response to changes brought by industrialization. A broadly based reform movement, Progressivism reached its height early in the 20th century and spread from cities to state legislatures, which adopted reforms such as the secret ballot, direct primaries, and direct election of senators. At the urban level the council-manager form of government and at-large elections were the two major reform legacies.

Today, at the turn of another century, the seeds for achieving more accessible, effective, and just governance are germinating once again in urban communities. With the erosion of public trust in Washington, more and more people are demanding that decisions be made by the governments closest to the people. This time the pressures for decentralized government are responses to changes that began in the 1960s, which include a shift in focus to individual rights and the development of information technology.

In the information age, the speed of information transfer has affected American society and its political institutions in numerous ways. For example, the traditional methods of communication through human contact and organizations have diminished in importance. In a sense, the information age, along with accelerated mobility and demographic changes, has created a new form of the nomadic lifestyle. Daniel Kemmis contends that the frequently lamented loss of our capacity for public life in fact parallels our loss of a sense of place.<sup>1</sup> We can certainly think of many examples of this in our own cities, from the loss of a shared civic memory due to a continuously changing population, to the multinational corporations that no longer recognize their ties to a local community (even those in which they have their headquarters) and to professionals who connect via the Internet with colleagues worldwide and do not know their colleagues on the next floor.

Another similarity between the information age and the Progressive era lies in the responses by political philosophers to the effects of technological change. Historian R. Jackson Wilson applied

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the theme “In Quest of Community” to his analysis of five thinkers of the period 1860-1920.<sup>2</sup> In the current era the diagnosis of serious decay of civic institutions and social trust in America has inspired a philosophy and political movement known as communitarianism. The diverse views of these political thinkers share a concern that the focus on individual rights and claims to individual choice in the last half of the 20th century have been at the expense of such considerations as the common good, citizenship, and virtue.<sup>3</sup> Sociologist Richard Sennett considers the longing for community to be one of the consequences of modern capitalism, in which working conditions have eaten away at loyalty and commitment.<sup>4</sup>

In human history a tendency exists for pendulum swings between two poles; for example, between the poles of centralization and decentralization, or of order and chaos, or of individualism and community. When unacceptable excesses at the dominant pole become apparent to enough citizens, there is a powerful tendency to push toward the opposite pole. It is not uncommon, therefore, for a Newt Gingrich to be followed by a Dennis Hastert, or for a period marked by individual self-indulgence to be followed by concern for community. In politics the pendulum seldom stabilizes in the middle, because the forces pushing toward each pole are unequal at any given point in time. A common thread through this essay addresses the need to redress the contemporary imbalance between conflict and cooperation in our communities and to suggest ways to push the pendulum toward more cooperative attitudes and actions.

One dysfunctional trend in the American polity in recent years has been a denigration of compromise, with the result that citizens and their representatives stake out intractable positions on issues and then either disrupt or bail out of the system if they cannot win in a zero-sum game. Alternatively, they resort to the federal courts for resolution of conflicts that should be resolved in political venues. Furthermore, short-term interests dominate, from corporations to private lives, and this in turn cultivates an expectation of immediate results. Such attitudes create adversarial relations, which are further inflamed by the need to create conflict to get noticed by the media and by government officials.

If we are to change the poisonous climate where we trash those with whom we disagree, and make every issue adversarial, we must

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find ways to revitalize democratic politics, which requires a commitment both to fair process and to the ideals of the nation's founding documents. Democratic politics is fundamentally the art of compromise. This does not mean compromise halfway between two positions, but rather compromise among multiple positions through the deliberative process of finding a common ground that is a better solution. In other words, forging compromise is a process in which persons of good will consider the interests of others as well as their own and take the time to find the highest common denominator.

David Mathews, president of the Kettering foundation, points out that "common ground isn't waiting to be discovered like some lost pet; it is created by people who deliberately set out to create it."<sup>5</sup> The framers of the United States Constitution set a standard for creating common ground when they drafted a fundamental document that has not only endured, but has been a model for constitution-making worldwide. The resulting "bundle of compromises" ameliorated the major concerns of most interests, which was necessary for securing ratification by the required number of states in order to establish a new government.

The principle of majority rule together with the protection of minority rights is the linchpin of the Constitution. Consequently, one of the requirements for inclusive democratic politics is an attitude that accepts a longer view and settles for losing today, as long as the rules give one a chance to be in the majority another day. The citizen learns that it is de Tocqueville's "self-interest properly understood" to engage in give-and-take, to agree to disagree with respect and civility, and to listen and learn from other voices. In other words, just as it is often enlightened self-interest to defer immediate pleasure in our private lives for greater rewards in the future, so it is enlightened self-interest to contribute to a more cooperative, deliberative politics. Although deliberative politics is time-consuming, it avoids the wearisome, ubiquitous conflict that appeals to selfishness and not to the "better angels of our nature," to use Lincoln's memorable phrase.

Furthermore, a society such as ours which enjoys relative freedoms needs constant reminders of the fragility of democracy. Not only is a democratic polity difficult to obtain, but it is difficult to sustain without constant attention from its citizens and their leaders. Democratic governance is always a work in progress in which freedoms are appre-

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ciated most by those who have fought to secure them and are often taken for granted by most others until they are lost. Benjamin Franklin warned, after the signing of the Constitution of the United States, “It’s a republic, if you can keep it.”

Concerning a time in the more recent past, Milton Mayer recorded a colleague’s chilling reminder of each individual’s responsibility to sustain democracy:

Pastor Niemöller spoke for the thousands and thousands of men like me when he . . . said that, when the Nazis attacked the Communists, he was a little uneasy, but, after all, he was not a Communist, and so he did nothing; and then they attacked the Socialists, and he was a little uneasier, but, still, he was not a Socialist, and he did nothing; and then the schools, the press, the Jews, and so on, and he was always uneasy, but still he did nothing. And then they attacked the Church, and he was a Churchman, and he did something—but then it was too late.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

I have assigned myself the task of sketching a conceptual framework for thinking about the urban polity. How we conceive of the city generates the kind of questions we ask, and these in turn channel our search for just and effective remedies for urban problems. The challenge is to find appropriate tools to guide practical reforms within the parameters of a society’s core values. I shall propose three such tools. In addition, in order to anchor these tools in the machinery of practical politics, I will illustrate how each casts a light different from the conventional on a controversial urban political issue by using as an example the efforts to achieve fair representation on the Dallas City Council.

The first tool guides reform proposals into a wider channel of contextual and qualitative considerations than has frequently been the case in an era that is ahistorical and quantitatively oriented. In the first section of this essay, I argue for an approach to policy-making that views the city as a *network of interconnections*, both internally and externally. This holistic approach requires attention to multiple contexts and to the likely impact of policy choices on the *system*. This approach is in contrast to the contemporary reliance on statistics, especially in political science, economics and in the media, which strips issues of context and historical understanding.

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The second tool guides policy considerations with a concept of the *public interest*. In this section I will narrow the focus to three sectors within the city—government, business, and civil society (citizen organizational activity)—and their interconnections and relative influence. I will outline both the advantages and disadvantages of viewing civil society as the way to create unity, *i.e.*, a public, in a context of conflicting interests.

The third tool guides deliberations toward a broad public consensus on major policy issues through mediating institutions. This tool is now broken and needs to be repaired or else replaced by new institutions that can broker public consensus. I will give particular attention to the changed functions of the political parties and the media and the diminution of their roles as mediating institutions connecting citizens with their government.

**I. On Considering the City as a Network of Interconnections**

*When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.*—John Muir<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary fascination with and reliance on statistics, especially in political science, economics, and in the media, strips issues of context and historical understanding. The argument that the government and politics in a city must be considered in a broader context is certainly not new, but it bears constant repeating in an era that is ahistorical and quantitatively oriented.

The organization of humans in cities has a long history dating back at least 5,000 years to Mesopotamia. And for the first time in history, more than half of the world population will be urban within the next few years. Throughout this long history of increasing urbanization, form has followed function. Aristotle identified the functions of the polity as food, arts, arms, revenue, religion, and government. He defined government as “the power of deciding what is for the public interest, and what is just in men’s dealings with one another.”<sup>8</sup> These remain basically the same functions today, although we might use different language and enlarge the list.

The biologists tell us that in their field form also follows function, and hence convergent evolution keeps happening, “because organisms keep wanting to do similar things, and there are only so many ways of doing them, as dictated by physical laws.”<sup>9</sup> It may not be sur-

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prising then, that for purposes of security, for example, the gated communities in modern America do not differ much from walled medieval cities.

A kind of convergent evolution occurs in urban places. Major cities in the United States, and, indeed, in many parts of the world, have evolved to look somewhat alike, experience similar problems, and share in varying degrees the common characteristics of population density, organizational complexity, and dependence on commerce and industry. Furthermore, there are a limited number of governmental forms. But these similarities obscure the great variety in the physical, cultural, economic and political features that distinguish American cities. Hence, apparently similar procedural or policy changes instituted in different urban settings produce different consequences, just as the same seeds planted in different soils may produce different results.

Many view cities as geographical entities unto themselves, abstracted from their specific cultural contexts and from the broader context of their external environments. This may be true of cities as legal entities, but in reality they are more like “an island in the sea, separate on the surface, but connected in the deep,” to borrow William James’ image. “In the deep,” cities are shaped by their own historical, physical, cultural, economic and sociopolitical environments, as well as by their citizens. Although much of the writing about cities deals with impersonal forces, especially market forces, cities are fundamentally human creations.

No clear boundaries mark the multiple environments of a city and no page numbers demarcate the past, present, and future of a city as if they were chapters in a book. President John F. Kennedy once said, “History is a relentless master. It has no present, only the past rushing into the future.”<sup>10</sup> The present looms large for those laboring in its midst. For perspective, I think of the present as the prism through which both the impersonal forces and the human decisions of the past are reshaped and refocused to alter course toward a community’s aspirations for a better future. And all the while, this is a dynamic, moving picture. Unlike the static picture that freezes a moment in time, the city is a continuously changing pattern in time and space of interrelationships among its inhabitants in their public and private lives. That fluid pattern is circumscribed by multiple environments

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over some of which we have little, if no, control. These environments range from the impact of weather patterns, to global economic forces, to national and state legislative constraints. The nature of the interconnections among multiple contexts, as well as the nature of the interrelationship among impersonal forces and the influence of leaders and ideas, is open to debate.

Scholars have formulated numerous theories of the city, but a unifying theory that comprehends the multiple complexities of the city is as elusive as Stephen Hawking's quest for a "theory of everything" in theoretical physics. Some promising work is being done on complexity theory by interdisciplinary groups of scholars at the Santa Fe Institute and the University of Michigan.<sup>11</sup> But at present a way to identify the general principles that govern the dynamics of complex systems has so far eluded researchers. As John Holland has written, "It is more than an academic quest to try to understand the persistence and operation [of a complex community,] because pressing problems, such as prevention of inner-city decay, turn on this understanding."<sup>12</sup>

Of course, because changes introduced into a complex system may have unintended, or at least unanticipated, consequences, they have long been an object of study for social scientists, using various descriptions and labels. One of the most popular formulations is the butterfly effect prominent in chaos theory—that is, a distant or single change has a nonlinear multiplier effect on other changes. Goethe phrased it more poetically in *Faust*:

One treadle sets a thousand threads in motion,  
The shuttles shoot to and fro,  
Unperceived the threads flow.<sup>13</sup>

Each decision in the city sets "threads in motion" which affect the range of possible choices in the future. I shall illustrate the importance of one of Goethe's "unperceived threads" as it relates to the impact of voting rights law on the Dallas City Council.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is the 20th-century manifestation of the ongoing, though episodic, attempt to fulfill the promise nine decades earlier of the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." The framers of the United States Constitution made clear in 1787 that the form of government for achieving "the consent of the governed" would be representative.



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What “representative” means, however, has puzzled and preoccupied political philosophers and practitioners from the Middle Ages to the present. It should not be surprising, therefore, that neither the courts nor the Congress have been able to define a workable gauge for enforcing “fair representation,” either through legislation or adjudication.

In the minds of many, the Voting Rights Act is synonymous only with the original provisions of the legislation in 1965, that resulted in a long-overdue and dramatic increase in registration and voting in the jurisdictions covered by the legislation. That immediate positive impact on voter registration of those original provisions has not been seriously challenged. The divergent opinions on the systemic effect of the legislation stem from the significant transformations in the law created by the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1970, 1975, and 1982.

The target of the original provisions seemed clear, but when blacks could finally register and vote, and nothing in their daily lives seemed to change, further pressures were applied. A review of the chaotic path resulting from the three major amendments to the Voting Rights Act illustrates the problem of linear and additive thinking when dealing with complex dynamic systems. The major theoretical difficulty with the legislation is that the assumptions that underlie the original Voting Rights Act apply to the Fifteenth Amendment (the right to vote) and not to the Fourteenth (equal protection of the laws), which became the focus through the subsequent amendments; and the assumptions apply to blacks, and not necessarily to other minority groups in our society.

Among the assumptions applicable to blacks as a protected group are a history of official political discrimination, residence in geographically defined areas as a result of segregated housing, and political cohesiveness. When language minorities were added as a protected group under the Voting Rights Act Amendment of 1975, some of the assumptions were no longer applicable. Among Spanish-language minorities, for example, there is more geographic dispersal and less political cohesiveness among nationalities. Furthermore, not all Spanish-language minorities carry the psychological burden of discrimination that has been the experience of those of Mexican descent. Nevertheless, the preferred judicial remedy of single-member districts for city councils that had been devised based upon

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the earlier assumptions applicable to blacks had become fixed as precedent, even though they might disadvantage other groups.

Because the rights protected by the Constitution are essentially “negative,” or freedoms and immunities *from* governmental interference, rather than providing benefits *to* individuals, the courts normally engage in *proscriptive* adjudication. The extraordinarily complicated issue of fair representation is one of those infrequent instances in which courts developed affirmative remedies, or *prescriptive* law. In doing so, they entered a quagmire when they moved from viewing voting rights as the right to vote by individuals to the concept of a group right to an “undiluted” vote as measured by representation in proportion to population. When the courts settled on the preferred remedy of single-member districts, inevitably, the litigation over the number of districts and the gerrymandering of district lines created conflict and brought different emotion-laden historical memories to the claims for “safe” seats at the council table. Those issues most dependent upon political compromise because of their complexity and subtlety, are least conducive to the legal model, in which plaintiffs frame the questions and “rules” frame the answers. The judicial process by its very nature and its internal dynamics limits the scope of relevant considerations, as well as the range of remedies that might be considered. It is a win-lose, rather than a collaborative, arena.

As I have mentioned, different groups bring different emotion-laden historical memories to the table. We often fail to appreciate that the colonial era in American history, was as long—nearly two centuries on the Atlantic seaboard and three centuries in the southwest—as our period of nationhood under the Constitution of the United States. Today’s southwest was governed by the Spanish from 1540 to 1821 and by the Republic of Mexico until 1848, with the exception of Texas, which was an independent nation from 1836 to 1845. After the Texas Revolution in 1836, Texas Mexicans became “foreigners in their native land,” and lost political power quickly.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, signed in 1848 ending the Mexican War, promised that Mexicans who stayed in Texas and the rest of the southwest would receive “all the rights of citizens of the United States.” Nevertheless, as historian David J. Weber notes, “. . . it seems clear in retrospect that this promise was

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not fulfilled. At best, Americans of Mexican descent became second-class citizens. At worst, they became victims of overt prejudices and carried the psychological burden of discrimination.”<sup>15</sup>

Because of their special history, Americans of Mexican descent in Texas justifiably believe that they have as great a claim as Americans of African descent to economic and political affirmative action. The latter in Texas justifiably believe that their historical experience, together with their initiation of the civil rights movement, by which Americans of Mexican descent are benefitting, entitles them to a greater claim to the benefits of affirmative action. Consequently, race-based districting creates conflict among groups rather than the cooperation required if efforts to effect change are focused on registering, voting, and coalition-building. Even so, while voting is significant, democracy “is not simply a decision rule for registering choices; it has to operate with a commitment to inclusiveness.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, according to Clarence Stone, “some notion of social learning is an essential part of the democratic process; all are entitled to have their situations understood.”<sup>17</sup> Because social learning was too slow in Dallas, the courts intervened to counterbalance the protection of special privileges.

## II. On Strengthening Civil Society

*Mankind at first lived dispersed, and there were no cities. . . . After a while the desire of self-preservation gathered them into cities; but when they were gathered together, having no art of government, they evil intreated one another, and were again in process of dispersion and destruction. Zeus feared that the entire race would be exterminated, and so he sent Hermes to them, bearing reverence and justice to be the ordering principles of cities and the bonds of friendship and conciliation.—Plato<sup>18</sup>*

Aristotle made a similar point in *Politics*: a political community “comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, although the city has a natural basis in economics, it has a natural purpose in ethics.

The city which I have described as a changing pattern in time and space is a community in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We know that systems exist in which the constituent

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elements appear and disappear and are in a constant state of flux, yet exhibit coherence in the face of change. This seems to be true whether we are considering galaxies, ecosystems, ant nests, or cities. A city continues even when its demographics change, its political structures and processes change, the businesses and industries on which its economic development has previously depended change, and its values and aspirations change.

If the city is greater than the sum of its parts, then surely a public interest exists that is greater than the sum of individual interests or group interests. The ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Rights frame the public interest. These statements of human aspirations are the lodestar by which we chart our course, even when human failings drive us temporarily off course.

Within that framework, candidates for more specific statements of common interests in an urban community include these aspirations:

- a city that is economically prosperous with a free-market economy, in which the excesses of capitalism are tempered by a commitment to social justice;
- a city which serves the needs of its citizens, and the citizens in turn serve it through civic participation to make meaningful “government by the people;”
- a city in which citizens feel they belong to each other, and also live individual lives in which their privacy is respected; and
- a city that honors those who put principle above power—meaning over making money, character over corruption, and common good over personal ambition.

The difficult task, of course, comes in applying abstract principles to specific situations. Here the sincere and passionately held views of individuals, based on their different underlying assumptions and experiences, come into conflict. How does a city translate such general goals and ideals into specific public policies that serve the good of the whole?

The first step is to create an environment where citizens desire to serve the larger good. T.H. Huxley said, “The highest conceivable form of human society is that in which the desire to do what is best for the whole, dominates and limits the action of every member of that society. The more complex the social organisation the greater the

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number of acts from which each man must abstain, if he desires to do that which is best for all.”<sup>20</sup> Too idealistic? For the doubters, we have ample evidence of the human capacity to make sacrifices for the good of the whole: for the family or the military unit or to serve the public. I believe that leadership can call forth the nobler instincts in humans to commit their efforts to something greater than themselves. Sociologist Harry Boyte found, for example, that the participants in the Civilian Conservation Corps had a strong sense of citizenship forged through their experience of doing what was widely considered important public work.<sup>21</sup>

Even when Huxley’s “desire to do what is best for the whole” permeates a community of citizens, whose vision of what is best should prevail? Some theorists contend that the essence of liberalism is neutrality concerning individual conceptions of what is good.<sup>22</sup> Others believe that the liberal state has a set of public purposes that gives it unity.<sup>23</sup> The litigation in Dallas to replace at-large districts with single-member districts was a contest in part between two views of the city: on the one hand, that citywide interests can be identified and should be; and on the other hand, that citywide interests exist in the eyes of the beholder and simply reflect the dominant interests.<sup>24</sup> When the question was framed as either at-large districts or single-member districts, the answer had to be win-lose. Only a mixed plan would have accommodated both views, which was the kind of compromise worked out by the framers in creating a House of Representatives based upon population and a Senate based upon geography.

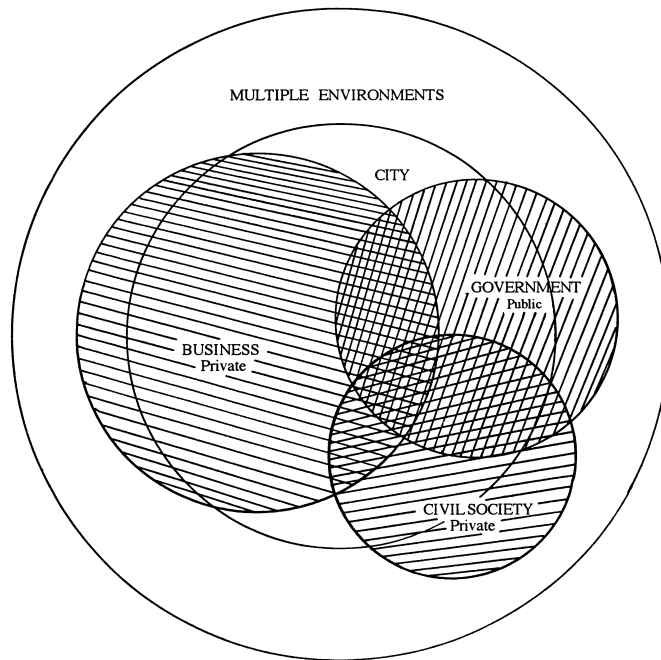
We also know that even if intentions are good and goals have been generally agreed upon, actually making the changes to achieve those goals is extraordinarily difficult in the face of strong vested interests in the status quo. Everyone seems interested in change in general until specific changes are proposed that might adversely affect their claims. As Joseph Schumpeter wrote, “even if a sufficiently definite common good—such as for instance the utilitarian’s maximum of economic satisfaction—proved acceptable to all, this would not imply equally definite answers to individual issues.” For example, he continued, “‘Health’ might be desired by all, yet people would still disagree on vaccination and vasectomy.”<sup>25</sup> Even if “fair representation” might be desired by all, people still disagree on whether groups are better

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served by “safe” districts or by “influence” districts and coalition politics.<sup>26</sup>

My entry point for considering the public interest is to reflect on the interconnections between the three major sectors in a city: the public sector, the business sector, and the sector that encompasses the civil society organizations.<sup>27</sup>

The pictograph represents a city within multiple environments. The size of the circles indicates the relative influence of each of the three sectors in city governance. In this version business dominates. In another version the relative influence of the two private sectors might be in closer balance. One can use this approach to think about one’s own city.



The three sectors interrelate with each other in a variety of ways, and they also interconnect with external environments. Furthermore, each of the sectors takes on the character of other sectors in some of

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their activities. Nor does this simplified pictograph suggest that the sectors are monolithic. The difference between the influence of a multinational corporation and a small entrepreneurial business can be almost as significant as the difference between a corporation and a voluntary association. For example, small vendors may have as much difficulty gaining access to capital as a not-for-profit organization.

The regime theorists tell us that an urban regime is “the informal arrangements by which public and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions.”<sup>28</sup> In Dallas, for example, the strongest “informal arrangements” have been between government and business. Indeed, the city mantra is “The business of Dallas is business.” When the president of General Motors said that “What is good for General Motors is good for the country,” there was a national outcry. When Dallas leaders justify policies based on the assertion that what is good for business is good for the city, citizens with different voices are silenced as naive or discounted as troublemakers. Cynicism is the by-product when citizens discover that leaders have clothed their own ambition as “the public interest.”

Of course, given the nature of our market-driven society, the systemic bias is toward capital, and hence much of the literature on cities focuses on the business-government nexus. Certainly, it is indisputable that economic prosperity goes a long way toward solving pressing problems facing a community. Anyone would rather be mayor and city manager of a city with an expanding tax base than of one facing a nose-diving economy. Not surprisingly, therefore, the interests of political leaders and business leaders in economic development coincide. City officials depend upon capital investment for city priorities, and elected officials depend on financial support from the business community. In turn, business depends on the government for policies that favor its economic interests.

Nevertheless, in reality, the capitalist system breaks down when the price mechanism breaks down. How do you price public goods, such as safe streets, unpolluted air, and social services to the needy? We all have a common interest in an economically prosperous city with a free-market economy, and we all have a common stake in a socially just society. How do you create a level playing field on which these dual priorities can compete? One answer is a balance of influence. With enough support backing noneconomic public policy

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initiatives, public officials can sometimes say “no” to business and “yes” to others among their constituents.

Today, citizens in this country and worldwide are looking to civil society associations to generate support for noneconomic public policy initiatives to offset the dominance of economic interests. While we talk freely of the global economy, Lester M. Salamon contends that we are also in the midst of “a ‘global associational revolution,’ . . . of structured citizen action outside the boundaries of the market and the state.”<sup>29</sup> His point is supported by the fact that even a World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS) was established in 1993. In the United States the contemporary interest in civil society is a renewed interest rather than a new phenomenon. Alexis de Tocqueville is credited with identifying the American propensity for forming associations in 1835 in *Democracy in America*. Even so, since our earliest history, American citizens have gotten together to solve problems, rather than rely on government.

Realistically, and taken all together, intermediate institutions do not have the financial resources required to address many community problems. So, for very practical reasons, business and government in a city can be powerful forces either to stimulate or stifle civil society organizations. Like business, voluntary organizations depend upon support and favorable government policies. Like government, voluntary organizations depend upon financial support from the corporate sector. Many members also can benefit from the expertise of businessmen and bureaucrats because of lack of management training and experience. A great deal of collaboration and partnering among the public, private, and nonprofit sectors does in fact occur. One can cite many remarkable and constructive examples in our cities, from community policing and neighborhood block watches to business-school partnerships and mentoring programs. Some of this collaboration is stimulated by foundations through their grants. Some is carried out by businesses and individuals both through direct financial support and *pro bono* services.

Citizen involvement in organizations has a number of salutary consequences. These include the development of the capacities of the individual, or the educative function of associations that de Tocqueville called “large free schools.” By working in associations, large numbers of citizens can learn the reality of constraints under



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which government and businesses operate, as well as their areas of flexibility and discretion. Organized activity also contributes to the creation of community and the cultivation of democratic habits. In an influential lecture in 1995, Robert Putnam applied to problems of contemporary American public life his earlier argument that membership in groups creates “social capital” or “networks, norms and trust . . . that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.”<sup>30</sup> People become useful citizens, in other words, not through the rhetoric of empowerment, but by working together in the trenches on specific initiatives over time. The education of individuals and the cultivation of democratic habits are congruent with community interests.

A third consequence of organized activity may not be congruent with community interests. The assumption is that strong and politically active civil society organizations can hold government accountable to the public interest. The implication is that civil society can act as a counterweight to the political influence of the business sector in public policy-making. One cannot assume, however, that all civic associations, much less the civil society in aggregate, are pursuing common interests with praiseworthy public purposes. In their advocacy roles, civic associations also may introduce conflicts among individual and group interests in an urban community. The mirror image of the salutary consequences of voluntary organizations in their advocacy roles is the image of the “special interests” that have given rise to the single-issue politics which are almost universally decried.

Consequently, I argue that we should shift the discourse to the common element in all three sectors—*viz.*, the citizen *qua* citizen. This means cultivating a climate in which individuals do not remove their public responsibility hat when they put on their hat as CEO, or city agency head, or member of a voluntary association. A change in civic culture, in the final analysis, must come from a change in the minds and hearts of its citizens, as every individual has an informal partnership with his or her city. Leaders in the business community can model socially responsible behavior and discourage exploitive behavior. This is de Tocqueville’s “self interest properly understood.” Unless companies lessen the growing gap between society’s values and expectations and how business is generally practiced, they may

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discover too late that they have ignored corporate citizenship at their own peril and thereby invited increasing government regulation. Employees and suppliers are citizens. How they are treated can create cooperation and trust or cynicism.

The relationship between citizens and government officials is also two-way: while politicians respond to the public will, they in turn influence public behavior. If politicians wish to awaken in citizens their responsibility toward society, then they should think less about making their mark with trophy projects that benefit the few and more about the common good. As Václav Havel writes, “After all, politics is a matter of serving the community, which means that it is morality in practice.”<sup>31</sup>

How can we coordinate or find institutional ways to connect the citizens and government? Companies focus on survival in a competitive economy; civil society organizations focus on their areas of community service; elected public officials try to respond to their constituencies; and city employees strive to be accountable to the standards of their professions as well as to the city council. How can these interests be brought together for an effective and just city governance? “The essence of political life,” according to Hanna Pitkin, “is precisely the problem of continually *creating* unity, a public, in a context of diversity, rival claims, unequal power, and conflicting interests.”<sup>32</sup>

### **III. On the Need to Reinvent Mediating Institutions**

I now turn to the prospects for reinventing mediating institutions that can facilitate cooperation and achieve an acceptable level of public consensus for responding to urban challenges. Historically, the political party and the fourth estate performed the unifying and mediating roles in the political system. Both, however, have been transformed by changes over the past four decades that have had significant consequences for the body politic.

#### **Political Parties**

Political parties, which are not mentioned in the Constitution, developed extraconstitutionally to fill a need. Parties, and slating groups in cities with nonpartisan elections, organize individuals of similar values to recruit and screen candidates, raise funds and

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provide other resources for campaign support, and mobilize votes to win elections, and thereby effect government policies. The advantage to the candidate of a system of political parties or slating groups is to have available a ready made campaign organization and a core group of voters. The advantage to the voters is that party and slating group labels give cues as to the likely policy positions of the candidates and the groups to whom they are accountable, which simplifies voting choices.

These traditional roles of the political party have been assumed by others: candidate-centered organizations now organize and raise funds for their campaigns; and the media now serve as the communications link to the voters in lieu of direct contact between citizens and party activists.

The United States has the oldest party system in the world in which the same two parties have competed continuously for power. During most of this history, the parties served as broad umbrellas unifying diverse interests under their banners. The right wing of the Democratic Party overlapped with the left wing of the Republican Party, creating a moderate middle which has now largely disappeared. After the 1968 Democratic Party Convention in Chicago, those unifying umbrellas began collapsing for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- The party lost the nominating function when presidential primaries were substituted for party caucuses in determining the presidential nominee.
- The party lost its role in screening and recruiting candidates with the rise of candidate-centered campaign organizations.
- The party lost the loyalty of voters with the rise of the “independent” voter, who responded to candidate-centered campaigns.
- Gerrymandered single-member districts gave rise to safe havens for incumbents and for special interests, who could afford politically to be extremists rather than centrists.
- Television news became the dominant communications link, which gave primacy to personalities over ideas.

In the case of slating groups, once again the experience of Dallas provides an example of the linear thinking characteristic of the judicial process on a complex issue such as fair representation. Throughout history, one party or the other at the national level has

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dominated elections for long periods. Similarly, at state and local levels, one finds lengthy periods of one-party dominance. However, continuous success, such as the decades-long Democratic dominance in the south, has not been a basis for court challenge. On the other hand, the courts accepted the argument that domination of elections by a slating group in Dallas was *prima facie* evidence of minority discrimination.

I independently tested the slating group and anti-slating group voting patterns in Dallas elections against the partisan voting patterns in national elections, and find that voting for city council candidates tracks the voting patterns in partisan elections. For example, the combined vote for the populist Wes Wise and the black candidate Al Lipscomb over businessman Avery Mays in 1971 was about the same percentage as the vote for George McGovern over Richard Nixon in 1972 in the predominantly black precincts. The dominance of the Citizens Charter Association in Dallas city politics from 1931 to 1975, in point of fact, meant *de facto* control of city government by conservative Democrats. One can hardly argue based on the data that either the liberal Democrats or the Republicans would have won city elections during that period had Dallas had partisan elections. The conservative Democrats and the supporters of the Citizens Charter Association simply had the support of the majority of voters.

For comparable data after the demise of slating groups in the mid-1970s, I used endorsement by *The Dallas Morning News* as the proxy for slating by the Citizens Charter Association (CCA). In 104 contested races between 1977 and 1997, the “success rate” of *The Dallas Morning News*-endorsed candidates was 80 percent. This compares with the 82 percent success rate of CCA-endorsed candidates in council races between 1959 and 1973 quoted by Stephen Elkin.<sup>33</sup> These data support the point that the conservative business orientation continues to dominate electoral success in Dallas regardless of slating/endorsement patterns and regardless of council structure. When slating groups were openly acknowledged, voters at least had a cue as to whether to vote for the slate or to vote to “throw the rascals out.” Today, the only cue is *News* endorsements.

The pattern of *News* support for candidates in the majority black districts also gives credence to the argument that the business community (as represented by the Citizens Charter Association and

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*The Dallas Morning News*) supported more conservative candidates than the voters in those districts. Of the 21 races in which the *News*-endorsed candidate lost, 14 were in districts in which the voting age majority was a racial minority. It is also important to note that the successful candidates in three of the 14 single-member districts are different candidates philosophically and in style than those supported by the *News* and those that by speculation would likely have been supported by the Citizens Charter Association had it continued to slate. Single-member gerrymandered districts, in other words, do in fact allow candidates who represent a minority—whether a partisan, racial, sexual preference, or other minority identity—to win a seat at the table. This is another of the reasons that there are fewer centrists today in representative bodies who have won seats through coalition politics.

I should note, however, that racial minorities, as well as social scientists, disagree as to whether “safe districts” or “influence districts” are the optimum arrangement for maximizing participation by minorities, and whether the principles of compact, contiguous districts that protect the integrity of neighborhoods are preferable to gerrymandered districts. Incumbents, regardless of race, prefer safe districts that have been gerrymandered for their benefit. Hence, individual ambition is brought to the drawing of district lines by city council members, unless they answer the call to conscience to do what is in the public interest.

Another disadvantage to incumbent advantage in devising districts is that the high rate of incumbency discourages voter turnout. Although registration laws have been liberalized, electoral participation has dropped steadily and hit a post-World War II low of 49 percent in the 1996 presidential elections and 36 percent in the November 1998 midterm elections. Even more disturbing is the disproportionate decline in voting rates among the poor and less educated. In other words, the gap is growing in political participation, as it is in income disparity. Curtis Gans, director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, believes, “[t]here is no structural thing that can be done that will in any significant way mitigate the problem. The broadest effect of turnout decline is that it makes our politics a politics only of the interested and the zealous.”<sup>34</sup> This further exacerbates the problem of the loss of the moderate

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middle. One plausible conclusion is that greater attention given to voting and coalition-building might have proven to be more effective than the efforts spent on changing structures. Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson reminded her constituents recently, “Many of us lived in a time where the disenfranchisement of our vote was common. Nevertheless, let me assure you that the greatest threat to our voting rights is not to vote.”<sup>35</sup>

The demise of the slating group that dominated Dallas politics for almost four decades has been attributed to court-ordered, single-member districts. But the crumbling of the Citizens Charter Association began before single-member districts were created. Local politics reflected the national antiestablishment mood, as well as increasingly fragmented power, the rise of intransigent special interest groups, and the new emphasis on plebiscitary democracy. Consequently, the support of a group that was essential for victory from the 1930s through the 1950s became the kiss of death in the 1970s. This is not unlike the fact that running as a Democrat in judicial races in Dallas County has become a kiss of death in the '90s. Political and social expectations changed. New claims were being made upon the political system.

As has been the case at the national level, slating groups have been replaced in Dallas by candidate-centered organizations. Consequently, without labels, voters do not know whether the candidates are independent voices or beholden to the informal business-government coalition discussed earlier, and therefore beholden to what one might call its shadow slating group. Furthermore, it is difficult for the average voter to obtain information on candidates except what is available in the media. And the media provide no voting record analyses, no computerized studies of patterns in campaign finance, and little analysis of the *why* behind the who, what, and when in city politics.

**The Media**

The most basic of all social processes is communication. In fact, historian Leonard M. Dudley weighs in on the argument over the origin of cities to posit that writing led to the rise of cities by increasing the optimal size of social information networks.<sup>36</sup> Democratic theory assumes that the roles of the media are: first, to

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provide a flow of accurate, timely information from diverse, competitive sources so that citizens can make judgments about politics; and, second, to serve on behalf of citizens as a watchdog on government. Today monopoly has replaced competition, and, with genuine investigative journalism comparatively rare, the watchdog has become a lapdog. We have turned the media, which have a special status in a democracy and First Amendment protection, into an advertising-driven commodity, which creates and caters to consumerism.

A number of trends are at work, including corporatism and monopolization, as well as tabloidism and reductionism in reporting. For the purposes of this essay, my concern is with the effect of these trends on the communications link between citizens and their city government. *The Dallas Morning News* is acknowledged as being among the best regional papers. But, by all accounts, the quality is slipping for reasons due in large part to national trends. The A.H. Belo Corporation in the past few years has transformed itself into the third-largest independent broadcaster in the nation, and it has financed its growth from its cash cow, the *News*.<sup>37</sup> The conflict behind closed doors between the news professionals and the business executives over Belo's profit demands surely replicates similar conflicts throughout the nation.

When the *News* won the war with the *Dallas Times Herald* and the latter folded in 1991, the major results were twofold. Since it was now a monopoly in one of the nation's largest markets, the *News*, which regularly prints more column inches of advertising than any other newspaper in the nation, almost immediately jacked up advertising rates.<sup>38</sup> Of more importance to the audience has been the decline in quality due to the loss of edge that results from competition, as well as increasing reliance on news services for reporting.

The reporting of political information has come to look much like M.C. Escher's "Balcony." In this etching, the spatial nature of the multistory houses is a fiction, as the bulge in the middle of the scene is a quadruple magnification of one balcony. This is not unlike the phenomenon of the front-page committee of *The New York Times* editors deciding what the daily lead news story is for the entire country. With the success of the *Times*' national edition launched in 1980, and the growth of the *Times*' news service, which is now second in size only to the Associated Press, "product differentiation"

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on what is important has been replaced by homogenized fare. Today, many U.S. newspapers do not finalize their own front pages until summaries of the *Times*' top stories reach them electronically.<sup>39</sup> This development goes hand-in-glove with the profit demands, since reprinting pieces available from the *Times*' talented writers reduces the need to invest in top-flight news staff locally. The result has been a loss of both quality and quantity in knowledgeable, rigorous reporting on local civic affairs.

Another serious fallout has been what one scholar has called "strategic silence," or what the news leaves out.<sup>40</sup> We know that in Dallas, as in other cities, some local stories are buried unless they are broken first by *The New York Times* or the *Dallas Observer*. A former city manager of Dallas believes that the rise of investigative journalism that came with Watergate in general would be fine, if reporters truly investigated and validated their information. "When the press was truly a watchdog, nobody wanted negative press," he says. "Now public servants have grown so cynical that they don't care, and lower level employees have told him that they don't have to worry about anything except November, February and May, which are the sweeps months."<sup>41</sup> These are the times when advertising rates are adjusted. As a result of this selectivity and cynicism, the news media shape the political landscape.

Among the recent empirical studies to support the view that the way in which the media frame issues shapes the public's view of politics is Shanto Iyengar's *Is Anyone Responsible?*<sup>42</sup> He explains television's role in impeding the recognition of the interconnections between issues, and in inhibiting the ability of the public to attribute political responsibility for problems and to hold elected officials and public institutions accountable. In another study, Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson provide empirical evidence that the media start the spiral of cynicism that erodes citizen interest in politics by the way they cover political events and issues. They conclude that the press has made it harder for the system to work.<sup>43</sup>

Just as there is renewed interest in civil society, there is also renewed interest in what is being called "public journalism" or "civic journalism."<sup>44</sup> The roots of the notion of public journalism, which is challenging today's mainstream journalism, also can be traced to the Progressive era, in which journalists played a key role. In October



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1994, the Pew Charitable Trusts established the Pew Center for Civic Journalism in Washington, D.C., to help provide legitimacy and financial support for the civic journalism movement.

While the attempt to connect journalists with the communities where they operate may be laudable, can any movement to shift media values to public reporting in an industry devoted to private gain achieve success? Here again, change requires courageous individuals in their citizen *qua* citizen roles. A little more than 100 years ago on August 18, 1896, Adolph S. Ochs, the founding father of the modern *Times*, published a declaration of principles setting forth his goals for a respectable newspaper. He was pitted in New York against powerful sensationalistic competitors in the heyday of yellow journalism. One of his stated goals was “to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved.”<sup>45</sup> And the *Times* survived.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have examined three tools to guide decision-making within the parameters of society’s core values: a holistic approach to policy-making that views the city as a network of interconnections, a concept of the public interest to guide policy considerations, and a need to restore some form of mediating institution to reconnect citizens and their government. The common thread is the need for a change in culture that begins with the individual. If it is true, as John Adams believed, that the American Revolution was in effect over before it began, having been accomplished “in the minds and hearts of the people,” then it is not too idealistic to suggest that a change in the minds and hearts of people today can bring about a revolution in our attitudes, habits, and opinions that is essential if we are to have the courage to address the decisions that will affect the next generation. If that be true, the words of Robert Kennedy should be one of our daily reminders:

Let no one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills—against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence. . . . Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events and in the total of all those who act will be written the history of this generation.<sup>46</sup>

*A Realistic Vision of a Just and Effective Urban Politics***Endnotes**

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- 26 In “safe” districts the minority population holds a 65-percent majority according to Department of Justice guidelines, while in “influence” districts the minority population does not hold a majority but is sufficiently large to influence who gets elected.
- 27 In its broadest sense, civil society encompasses the myriad of institutions that operate independently between individuals and the state. I am using it in the more restricted meaning to refer to the not-for-profit institutions and organizations established to serve community purposes. For a discussion of the differences in various meanings of “civil society,” see Benjamin R. Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), especially chapter 1.
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