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POLITICS, POLITICAL SCIENCE, AND URBAN GOVERNANCE: A Literature and a Legacy

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■ **Abstract** Politics has not always fared well in the political science literature on the cities, at least not in the United States. Since the mid-nineteenth century, a substantial literature has either decried or discounted the role of politics in urban governance. Much of the early literature, written before and just after the creation of the American Political Science Association in 1903, urged politics be banished and administration privileged as a way to remedy "one conspicuous failure of the United States . . . the government of cities." Subsequent literature reinstated politics—though some claimed elected officials were simply agents of special interests or upper-class elites. The prevailing view today is that political leadership is an important, independent factor in the governing equation, although it is arguable that of late national and state administrators have been empowered at the expense of local self-rule—thus approximating, albeit by different means, the system envisioned by early municipal reformers.

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to wrap your arms around a city; harder still your mind. Cities, by definition, are large and complex, which helps explain why there is no unified and universally accepted theory of urban life. To be sure, there are utopian visions of what the ideal city should be and, less grandly, tidy-town awards promoting some partial view of gracious urban living. But as yet there is no single theory that transcends time and place and fully describes, let alone explains, how cities work. There are instead numerous theories and studies that examine broad areas of city life, each seeking to leave the reader a little less bewildered than before. This includes the literature on urban politics and government in the United States, the focus of what follows.

The focus, less generally, is on academic writing about cities, principally, though not exclusively, writings by American political scientists. The survey is not exhaustive but selective and personal—such is the editorial warrant—and centers on writings that contribute to understanding key questions about city politics. The

selections derive from more than 100 years of articles, essays, books, and reports, beginning with mid–nineteenth century efforts to adapt intellectually and institutionally to the big city.

Cities in the United States share much with cities across the globe. The nation's big cities are a nineteenth-century phenomenon and their growth here coincided with urbanization elsewhere, especially in Western Europe. According to Weber, this concentration of population in cities was the most remarkable social phenomenon of a century not lacking for remarkable phenomena. As he noted, urbanization, along with other "agencies of modern civilization . . . worked together to abolish rural isolation" and subject it increasingly to urban influences (Weber 1899, pp. 1, 7, 448).

If the timing was similar, so too were the challenges. Large, densely settled communities create problems that intensify the needs associated with any human settlement. These include an adequate and healthy supply of food and water, effective methods for disposing of human and animal waste, shelter against the elements and against predators, and measures to deal with the extremes of material well-being and material deprivation. Failure to address these problems is a deadly constraint on all human places, especially on cities, which, because of their sheer size, are more vulnerable for example to epidemics or threats to the civil order.

URBANIZATION AND URBAN GOVERNANCE

Although similar in these respects, American cities are politically distinctive. This distinctiveness lies in the tradition and expectation of local self-government combined with a broad-based suffrage. It also lies in the character of urban populations, especially the impact of immigration on the politics and governance of the nation's big cities. These factors have helped frame the dialogue about cities and how we go about governing them.

Bryce's oft-repeated claim that "the government of cities is the one conspicuous failure of the United States" was a commonplace among political observers by the time he published *The American Commonwealth* in 1888 (Bryce 1891 [1888], I:608). By 1888 there was already a substantial literature reflecting widespread alarm about the sudden and sharp growth of cities—some relative newcomers, such as Chicago, but older, larger cities as well.

There was alarm, further, about the broadening of municipal functions—about increased spending and taxes, increased regulation of private property, and increased initiatives in social welfare. And there was alarm, most of all, about the management of municipal affairs—concerns not simply that city governments were reaching beyond the proper limits of state action but that essential functions were poorly tended and poorly administered by corrupt and unqualified officials.

This was one dimension of the "conspicuous failure," much of it detailed, early on, in accounts of individual cities. "It is not that the city government, so far as controlled by politicians, sometimes steals. We do not make that charge. We say

it does nothing *but* steal," Parton wrote in a lengthy review essay, "The Government of the City of New York" (Parton 1866, pp. 448–49). Parton's assessment derived partly from direct observation of the City Council (pp. 417–28) and its machinations, but chiefly from a review of various reports on New York City, most conducted by the Citizens Association of the City of New York, some few by the City or County of New York. The latter included the *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York*—"a most superb and lavishly illustrated duodecimo volume of 879 pages [containing] one hundred and forty-one pictures, of all degrees of expensiveness—steel-plate, wood cut, plain lithograph and colored lithograph—" for which the City paid $57,172.30 compared with production costs of $15,000 (1866, pp. 431–33). "Such is the book," Parton concluded, "which the taxpayers of the city are called upon every year to pay for, in order to swell the income of sundry printers, lithographers, politicians and the compilers" (Parton 1866, p. 432).

For Parton, the *Manual* showed just how far the spoils system had penetrated City government. "In the precious Manual . . . the reader, amazed at the interminable lists of persons employed by the city, is every now and then puzzled by such items as these." The items ranged from such low-level positions as "manure inspectors" and "distributors of corporation ordinances" to more prestigious-sounding positions, "inspectors of encumbrances," for example, and "health wardens and their assistants." Whatever the title, he added, the officials were little more than

> bar-keepers, low ward politicians, nameless hangers-on of saloons, who absolutely performed no official duty whatever except to draw the salary attached to their places. They were the merest creatures of the worthless man who appointed them—the man who sold or gave away blanket internment permits, signed to favored undertakers. (Parton 1866, p. 439)

Parton's extended essay is an early and noteworthy example of a genre that would become more commonplace in the literature on city governance. In a sense, it presaged the more celebrated exposés associated with the muckrakers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—politically engaged and faithful to the facts, but selective, not systematic, in their reporting. Aware that "we are all disposed to exaggerate evils [and that] good people are not quite as good nor bad people as bad as popular rumor gives them out," (Parton 1866, p. 416), Parton nonetheless emphasized the "bad." To do otherwise would be to complicate the story and undermine its purpose, which was to rally honest citizens by dramatizing just how much the system was costing them.

Though city-specific, Parton's account was addressed to a broader national audience. "Let no one suppose this is a subject which concerns the people of New York only," he counseled. "The insidious beginnings of that misgovernment which has made New York the by-word and despair of the nation can already be [found] in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Boston, New Orleans, San Francisco, Chicago, Albany, Rochester, Buffalo, St. Louis," and, he added, "many other cities" (Parton 1866, p. 464).

RETHINKING POPULAR RULE

By the end of the nineteenth century, accounts of municipal mismanagement across the country were commonplace in an expanding literature on the cities. Many such accounts, like Parton's, were city-specific, based on the work of local civic organizations and circulated through an emerging national network of local reform organizations. But there were more systematic accounts as well, including comparative financial data on individual cities first published by the U.S. Census in 1890 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1946, p. 286).

More important, reports of widespread municipal mismanagement prompted speculation that the problem was inherent in the very nature of city politics, not simply the result of occasional "defalcations" by a few venal public officials. The speculation centered principally on whether received notions of popular rule and the institutions embodying them were still suitable for governing the modern city—whether the ideas and the institutions could simply be adjusted or, instead, required radical rethinking and restructuring.

The issues were crucial to the fate of the democratic experiment. It was not simply that municipal responsibilities had broadened or were being mismanaged. The issues were crucial, as well, because city life was becoming the dominant culture in the United States and because city populations challenged the assumption that suffrage and self-government were suited to all peoples. In his Presidential Address at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Judson noted:

> It is in the government of our cities that representative government has had its most conspicuous failure, and it is therefore clear that the future of representative government is closely connected with and indeed dependent upon reform in municipal administration. . .. The civilized world is now watching with interest the struggle for representative government, where heretofore from the dawn of history autocracy has held an undisputed sway. It is for this country to show that the hopes and anticipations of the founders of our government will be realized through the only means whereby self-government can be preserved over an extended territory, and that is by true representative government. (Judson 1908, pp. 199–202)

These broad concerns figured prominently on the early agenda of the American Political Science Association. By the time the Association was founded in 1903, there was already a substantial "political science" literature on city government. Much of this had been published in such established journals as the *Political Science Quarterly* (founded in 1886), the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1890), the *Proceedings of the American Statistical Association* (1888), or in the publications of the American Economic and American Historical Associations.

Much of it, moreover, was written by early leaders in the profession, among them Frank Goodnow, James Bryce, Woodrow Wilson, Albert Bushnell Hart,

A. Lawrence Lowell, and Charles Merriam. According to its founders, the Association provided an additional and more focused venue for the "scientific study of the great and increasingly important question of practical and theoretical politics," including municipal government and politics (American Political Science Association 1904, p. 11).

The central question, as Judson asked, was whether popular rule and universal male suffrage were suited to managing the modern city. Democratic theory presumed voters would make informed, intelligent, and independent choices and that in doing so they would choose men of caliber and competence, the "fittest men" (Judson 1908, p. 186), and the "most highly gifted and highly activated" (Parkman 1878, p. 15). This was the republican tradition, or its presumption, one sanctified by Madison in *The Federalist 10* (p. 62). A republican form of government, Madison assured his readers, would "refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations." The record in the cities was otherwise.

The record was otherwise, according to a generation of political scientists, public intellectuals, and reformers, principally because of the party system, which, Bryce speculated (1891 [1888], I:608), "[had] not perhaps created, but certainly enormously aggravated [the evils] and impressed on them their specific type." Nominations and ballot access were two sources of its power. Another was its control of jobs, public revenues, and municipal regulatory authority, all of which, Bryce noted, the party used to "consolidate, extend and fortify its power." Once in power, moreover, a party tended to remain in power—unregulated electoral competition, it seems, created public monopolies (Bryce 1891 [1888], II:130 ff).

A third source of the party's staying power was its constituency base. The party was extraordinarily attentive to its constituents. It had developed elaborate grassroots organization "among the people" where party leaders would "see them and be seen" (Riordan 1963, p. 25). "Everybody in the district knew him," Riordan (1963, p. 90) said of Tammany Hall's legendary George Washington Plunkitt, "and everybody knew where to find him and nearly everybody went to him for assistance of one sort or another, especially the poor of the tenements" (1963, p. 90). Or, as Ostrogorski (1902, II:471) reported in his detailed, two-volume study *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, "The politicians of the Machine looked after the electors day after day, they attended to this business morning and evening, for years together, and not only during election time."

The character and competence of urban voters, without whose support party systems could not have endured, was an added matter of concern. The suffrage had been broadened earlier in the nineteenth century with the elimination of property and tax-paying qualifications. These changes, Martin Van Buren complained at the time, admitted to the polls "tens of thousands of ignorant and vicious men" who threatened to overwhelm responsible citizens and corrupt the ideals of local popular control (Parton 1866, p. 446). The threat had since intensified. Not only

had city populations grown but so too, it was said, had the relative numbers of ignorant and ill-informed voters.

Much of this growth was due to dramatic changes in the size and nature of foreign-born populations. Immigration, Mayo Smith allowed (1888, p. 48), had been one of the prime factors in the nation's development, but he questioned whether immigrants were "any longer a desirable element for the community to acquire." One concern was the source of immigration. The heaviest immigration, he reported, was now coming from those areas where poverty was the most striking—from the west of Ireland, for example, from the eastern provinces of Prussia, from the southern regions of Italy, and from those sections of Hungary "where the condition of the people is so strikingly inferior that it attracts universal attention." Smith concluded that emigration was "no longer culling and bringing . . . the cream of the working classes, the men of energy, thrift and enterprise . . . but as likely the indolent, vagrant and vicious" (1888, pp. 69–76).

It was also bringing individuals from "a class of society which [did] not concern itself about the form of government . . . and who [knew] little of our institutions and of our history, and [cared] less." Smith continued, "The franchise means to them simply an opportunity to sell their votes, and liberty is license to do as they please." As a result of "the infusion of so much alien blood into our social body," he added, there was a danger the nation would "lose [its] capacity and power of self-government, or that the elements of our national life shall become so heterogeneous that we shall cease to have the same political aspirations and ideals and thus be incapable of consistent political progress" (Smith 1888, pp. 415–22).

The immigrant's capacity for self-government was a common concern among a generation of scholars and intellectuals. "In those days," Steffens remarked (1931, p. 400), "educated citizens of the cities said, and I think they believed—they certainly acted upon the theory—that it was the ignorant foreign riff-raff of the big congested towns that made municipal politics so bad." Lacking a sense of civic duty, immigrants were nonetheless, according to Bryce (1891, II:358), "admitted to full civic rights before they [had] come to shake off European notions and habits. These strangers," he continued,

> enjoy political power before they either share or are amenable to American opinion. Such immigrants are at first not merely a dead weight in the ship, but a weight which the party managers can, in city politics, so shift as to go near upsetting her. They follow blindly leaders of their own race, are not moved by discussion, exercise no judgment of their own. (Bryce 1891, II:358)

Still, Bryce was optimistic. "The younger sort [of] foreigners," he suggested, "when . . . they have learnt English, when, working among Americans, they have imbibed the sentiments and assimilated the ideas of the country, are thenceforth scarcely to be distinguished from the native population" (Bryce 1891, II:358). Even Mayo Smith conceded that the children of immigrants "do often, in one generation, become good citizens," although he was less sanguine than Bryce in this regard (Smith 1888, p. 54). There was thus some hope the system could

socialize and assimilate the "other" and "make citizens intellectually and morally fit to conduct their government," which, Bryce told the profession in his 1909 Presidential Address (p. 12), was "the chief problem of democracy."

REDEFINING URBAN DEMOCRACY

Whatever the prospects, there were hesitations, widely shared among intellectuals, about the wisdom and practicality of urban democracy. There were concerns about big-city voters and whether they would choose the right kind of leadership, namely competent, honest, public-spirited individuals. And there were concerns about urban political systems and whether an excess of democracy made proper city government unlikely.

These were some of the questions "agitating the public mind," as Goodnow put it in his 1904 Presidential Address to the first annual meeting of American Political Science Association (1904, p. 36). Such questions prompted an extensive reexamination of democratic theory and practice as it had evolved in the nation's cities, along with an extensive literature on municipal government and politics.

Much of the literature was prescriptive and "busied itself," in Goodnow's phrase, "with agitation for some particular reform" (1904, p. 36). By the time Goodnow spoke, the catalogue of "particular reforms" was already as lengthy as it was familiar—voter registration laws, for example, including literacy tests and residency requirements; civic education; the direct primary, the short-ballot, and the nonpartisan election; proportional representation and at-large elections. Often advocated as discrete and even disjointed initiatives, most shared a common dimension, namely an ambivalence toward popular rule.

In principle, such prescriptions were fully consonant with the mission of the new Association. The "ultimate object of political science is moral . . . the improvement of government among men," Lowell told his colleagues in his 1910 Presidential Address (p. 14), and he chided "students of politics [for] not lead[ing] public thought as much as they ought to" in this regard (Lowell 1910, p. 4). At the same time, he insisted such leadership required that government be studied "as a science, as a series of phenomena of which [the investigator] is seeking to discover the causes and effects" (Lowell 1910, p. 14).

Lowell urged more scientific study of democracy, a novel experiment that had "lasted long enough to produce many of its normal results, and a vast deal of information may be obtained by observing them with scientific thoroughness and accuracy" (Lowell 1910, p. 14). And he challenged the profession to "observ[e] . . . with scientific thoroughness and accuracy" such phenomena as voting and nonvoting, political recruitment and turnover in office, and political parties and party bosses. With respect to the last, little was actually known—why, for example, bosses had thrived only intermittently and had been permanent in so few places; or why they ruled autocratically on some but not all issues. "If we knew these things accurately," he concluded, "we should be a much better position to contrive a remedy" (Lowell 1910, pp. 11–12).

According to Lowell, such studies were rare. "To advocate in this twentieth century the importance of studying the actual working of government may seem like watering a garden in the rain. But that this is not the case everyone must be aware who is familiar with the current political literature on such living topics as . . . the reform of municipal government" (Lowell 1910, pp. 2–3). There were exceptions: Merriam (1908) and Munro (1909), both of whom Lowell singled out for praise, and others whom he did not, including Ostrogorski (1902), who had already published an encyclopedic comparative study of political parties, and Steffens (1904), whose powerful exposé of city bosses and nouveau arrivé entrepreneurs had been presaged some years earlier, though not as colorfully, by Parkman (1878). But most writing on city politics, Lowell complained, was "theoretical," "conducted in the air," and "treat[ed] what ought to happen rather than what actually occurs." Many of these writers, he allowed, were "earnest men, overflowing with public spirit." But they were "prone to imagine a new device [would] work as they intended and [were] disappointed that it [did] not." The resulting "waste of precious efforts at reform, from a failure to grasp the actual forces at work" was, he concluded, "one of the melancholy chapters of our history" (Lowell 1910, p. 3)—a judgment reminiscent of George Washington Plunkitt's playful jibe that reformers "were mornin' glories—looked lovely in the mornin' and withered up in a short time, while the regular machines went on flourishing forever, like fine old oaks" (Riordan 1963, p. 17).

In an important sense, the record belies the rhetoric. Whatever the fate of individual reform initiatives, key reform ideals endured. Some were variants on traditional values and beliefs, for example, the faith in the efficacy of institutional engineering. Others combined old ideals with powerful new ones, notably professionalism.

A key objective was achieving the right kind of municipal leadership. "Democracy," Judson explained in his Presidential Address at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Association (1908, p. 186), was not "merely a means of securing an expression of the average intelligence in legislation . . . [T]he ideally perfect government was that in which the intelligence of the community, the fittest men, should be selected." Whatever the quality of municipal leadership in the past—and some, such as Parton, insisted there was a "time . . . when the city was governed by its natural chiefs—the men who had the divine right to govern it" (Parton 1866, p. 446)—"the very best of citizens" were no longer engaged in the enterprise. The reason, according to Bryce, was that they had either withdrawn from the struggle or were engaged in other more profitable activities. "Able citizens," Bryce reported (1891, I:613), "[are] absorbed in their private business, cultivated citizens unusually sensitive to the vulgarities of practical politics, and both sets therefore specially unwilling to sacrifice their time and tastes and comfort in the struggle with sordid wire-pullers and noisy demagogues." Or they were simply outnumbered, or outmaneuvered and outvoted by the political bosses and their allies.

One way to correct this was to reform city charters, state statutes, and state constitutions. Though frequently dismissed as overly mechanical—as Steffens once quipped, "paper government did not count" (1931, p. 409)—this type of reform had notable precedents. One was the nation's long-standing reliance on

written constitutions and the faith that well-designed laws could produce desired political and policy outcomes. This included Madison's claim, noted above, that a "republican form of government" would result in the election to office of public-spirited men.

Others, moreover, had shown "boss rule" was not inevitable even in large industrial cities and that municipalities could be governed effectively, efficiently, and with a high degree of integrity. Prussian municipalities were oft-cited examples. "Among the local elective organs of the various countries of Europe and America none have been more successful than the Prussian city councils in securing as members men of ability, integrity and general prestige," Munro reported in his exhaustive study of "*Government in European Cities*" (1909, pp. 150–51). Equally successful in this regard was the Magistrat, a local Prussian administrative board with broad municipal powers. Some of its appointed members were paid, professional administrators chosen for their special skill; the rest were men of financial means who could forego paid employment to serve the community. There was, as well, a professional bureaucracy, appointed and promoted "with due regard for merit and experience, security of tenure and protection against arbitrary dismissal." In Munro's mind, these features were key to the success of the system and to "much of the integrity and efficiency which characterize civic bureaucracy, particularly in Prussia" (Munro 1909, p. 205).

Although much admired, there were features of the Prussian system that, prima facie, made it an unrealistic proposition in the United States. One was the Magistrat, which was appointed, not elected—to choose its members "by universal suffrage would be to alter greatly its conservative character," which was, according to Bishop (1908, p. 410), "its greatest merit." Nor was the elected Council any less conservative, largely because of the electoral system employed. The city electorate was organized into three distinct classes, with each group paying one third of the total taxes and each electing one third of the councilors. As Munro observed, this arrangement put "the preponderance of influence in the hands of the wealthier citizens." It also brought "social and economic distinctions into the polling-room, where, according to the fiction that American cities have vigorously attempted to maintain, all citizens are equal" (Munro 1909, pp. 132–33).

Although the nation's egalitarian impulse made the Prussian system unlikely in the United States, its ideals remained at the core of municipal reform. It was unlikely, for example, that votes could be weighted as radically as in Prussia, but access to the vote could be limited through registration laws, residency requirements, and literacy tests. Nor was it likely city councilors in the United States would ever be "a well selected elite drawn from the professional, mercantile, and academic circles" or that there would come a day when their decisions would consistently represent not "the hasty transitory judgments of the masses but the best business sense of the community" (Munro 1909, p. 151). On the other hand, the unwholesome influence of elections could be minimized by constraining those most to blame, namely the political parties. This could be done by limiting the parties' role in the electoral process—through, for example, the direct primary, the

short ballot, and nonpartisan and at-large elections—as well as by denying them important resources, such as patronage and regular and special party financial assessments.

The "hasty, transitory judgments of the masses" could be minimized further by limiting the range of choices entrusted to voters and their elected representatives. Issues could instead be handled by professional administrators, appointed, not elected, on the basis of merit and free from partisan influence. Important municipal matters would thus be entrusted to those most qualified to deal with them, achieving indirectly what could not be achieved through elections. Of all the reform initiatives, these were arguably the most far-reaching and influential.

The justification for this vision of popular rule can be found in the early literature on the administrative state. Two such works stand out: Wilson's "The Study of Administration," published in the *Political Science Quarterly* in 1887, and Goodnow's *Politics and Administration,* published three years later. Both advocated a greater role for administration as distinct from politics in the governmental process. Politics, Goodnow explained (1890, p. 18), had to do with "policies or expressions of the state will"; administration with the "execution of these policies." Administration, moreover, was "removed from the hurry and strife of politics" (Wilson 1887, p. 209). The distinction was by no means straightforward, as Wilson himself confessed. "No lines of demarcation, setting apart administrative from non-administrative functions," he cautioned, "can be run between this and that department of government without being run up hill and down dale, over dizzy heights of distinction and through dense jungles of statutory enactment, hither and thither around 'ifs' and 'buts,' 'whens' and 'howevers' until they become altogether lost to the common eye not accustomed to this sort of surveying and consequently not acquainted with the use of the theodolite of logical discernment" (Wilson 1887, p. 211). Still, like Goodnow, Wilson was confident the distinction had meaning as well as merit. The "discrimination between administration and politics," Wilson insisted (1887, p. 211), "is now, happily, too obvious to need further discussion."

Though perhaps "too obvious," it plainly was not compelling, and Wilson complained the United States had been slow to act on the importance of the distinction. This was due largely to the country's long-standing suspicion of government power and the instruments of this power, namely "administrative organization and administrative skill." The nation, he complained, had stressed "curbing executive power to the constant neglect of the art of perfecting executive methods" and had invested "much more in controlling than in energizing government" (Wilson 1887, p. 206).

Changing this would be a major challenge. "The very fact we have realized popular rule in its fullness," he mused (Wilson 1887, pp. 207–9), "has made organizing that rule just so much more difficult" and made "practical reform slow and . . . full of compromises." Reform would be difficult because "in order to make any advance at all [reformers would need to] instruct and persuade a multitudinous monarch called public opinion . . . the bulk of which is rigidly unphilosophical . . . [but] votes." Even so, it was imperative the nation adopt "a science of administration," Wilson believed, "to straighten the paths of government, to make its

business less unbusinesslike, to strengthen and purify its organization, to crown its duties with dutifullness . . . and [to counter] the poisonous atmosphere of city government" (1887, p. 201).

The significance of all this for municipal government was in the specification of what constituted the administrative sphere and what constituted the political. The answer, in brief, was that "municipal government [was] . . . almost exclusively a matter of administration" (Goodnow 1900, p. 84). Politics thus would play a limited part in municipal affairs. There would be little need for those schooled in the art of politics, and there would be little need for burdening the electorate with matters beyond their competence. Such matters were more appropriately left to administrators specially educated and trained to handle them. In this way, previously vague urgings that the best people should be running municipal government became somewhat less indeterminate, since ideally municipal administrators would be recruited from the ranks of established professions and occupations with their seemingly scientific criteria for judging excellence. In this way, additionally, urban politics would be transformed. "Any reasonable man would willingly renounce his privilege of dropping a piece of paper into a box," Parkman had predicted in 1878 (p. 10), "provided good government were assured to him and his descendants." Or, as some had urged, the "right to good government" would finally take precedence over the "asserted right to self-government" (*North American Review* 1866, p. 250).

Though radical, this broad vision of urban politics found important institutional expression in the civil service and in the council-manager plan. To some, such as Tammany's George Washington Plunkitt, civil service was "the biggest fraud of the age and the curse of the nation" (Riordan 1963, p. 11). But the proposition that government personnel be hired, fired, and promoted solely on the basis of ability and performance is in principle quite unexceptional and proved attractive even to elected officials.

The devil, however, was in the details, namely specifying who would judge ability and performance and according to whose standards. In the case of the civil service, these determinations were to be made by boards or commissions that would be free of partisan and political pressures. Guided by the spirit of professionalism and with assistance from experts in each field, a civil service commission would classify jobs and write and administer exams that would produce personnel who satisfied the commission's a priori definition of a "good public servant." The electoral process is far less presumptuous in this respect, since it does not presume to tell citizens what kinds of people they must choose to govern them.

The council-manager plan was a second reform that sought to institutionalize the role of professionals and experts in the governance of cities. As set forth in the National Municipal League's revised *Model City Charter of 1915*, this innovative form of government called for an uncluttered hierarchical arrangement of municipal agencies. Ideally, the city council would be the sole elected body and as such responsible for establishing the broad outlines of municipal policies. These would be carried out by administrators chosen under the merit system, and the administrators, in turn, would be under the general direction of a professional

manager chosen by the council solely on the basis of managerial skills. The chief executive was thus appointed, not elected; accountable to the council, not the voters; and, in theory at least, indifferent to political and policy matters.

The manager plan thus embodied that vision of democratic politics in which elections and elected officials were to play a minimal role. True, there was an elected council, but the council consisted of part-time citizen legislators, volunteers who agreed to serve intermittently as the community principal policy makers. Councilors were to be paid token salaries—"lest the salary attract candidates whose real ambition is to get the money," as the plan's chief architect Richard Childs put it (Childs 1965, p. 69)—and would be thus forced to divide their time between the city's business and their own. They would have no staff and would be prohibited from dealing with "city officers and employees who [were] subject to the direction and supervision of the manager." Managers, on the other hand, would be full-time, as would the civil servants under them. And while the council attended to policy matters, the manager would attend to the day-to-day running of the city's business, most of which, according to orthodox reform thinking, was administrative, not political, in nature.

The council-manager plan represented a radically different vision of democratic politics from that which had prevailed earlier in the city. What had prevailed earlier, according to many, was too much democracy—too many elected officials and too frequent elections. These were perhaps entirely appropriate to earlier times, when municipal responsibilities were fewer and less complex, but no longer. Government's responsibilities were now greater, the suffrage had expanded, the electorate was radically different; voters and elected officials were generally more suspect and increasingly underqualified, technically and morally, to run city governments. There was virtual consensus in the literature on these points, as there was on the proposition that less democracy and more administration were what municipal government needed.

REINSTATING POLITICS

The broad vision of municipal government embodied in turn-of-the-century reforms proved remarkably durable. The proposition that cities are principally administrative, not political, entities is still widely though by no means universally accepted, and institutions such as the council-manager plan, nonpartisan elections, and at-large elections are now commonplace in city and town charters, albeit less so in the largest cities than elsewhere. For much of the century, moreover, this broad perspective on city government was accepted uncritically.

By mid-century, however, key assumptions were being challenged, especially the administrative principles on which so much of the reform initiative was based. The distinction between administration and politics, for example, no longer seemed as clear-cut as it had, even to reasonable, well-informed and public-spirited men and women. Nor were the principles of administrative science as scientifically certain

as before. These principles, or "proverbs of administration," to use Simon's phrase (1946, pp. 53–67), were often contradictory and inconsistent as well as unproved. Nor were they entirely value-free. Professional administrators, according to reform orthodoxy, would promote government efficiency, and efficiency was a value that was simply assumed, or asserted, to be the core value for city governments.

Though increasingly influential within the profession, these challenges had relatively little impact on the municipal government literature. In 1957, for example, Herson complained that "administrative dogma, based upon the premise of a value-free administrative process sank—in the literature of administration—beneath the waters of empirical investigation. But in the literature of city government, the dogma exists, an ice-age inhabitant of a lost Atlantis" (Herson 1957, p. 334). This was especially true of city government textbooks, where, he noted, "the administrative theory that entered the city government texts in 1920 did not adapt itself to subsequent changes in this theory, but persists unchanged" (Herson 1957, p. 334). Indeed, by 1920 the theory was well established in the innumerable textbooks published during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With notable exceptions, such as Beard's *American City Government* (1912), these texts promoted city government as chiefly an administrative and not a political concern.

It was not simply that the assumptions had gone unchallenged but, as well, that the claims and consequences of reform had not been systematically scrutinized. There was little evidence, for example, on the record of the council-manager plan—for many, the centerpiece of municipal reform. By 1957, the plan had been widely adopted, and, as Herson notes, this record was often cited as evidence that the plan delivered on its promise of honest and efficient city government (Herson 1957, p. 340). But despite a great deal of celebratory literature, much of it published in and by the *National Municipal* (now *Civic*) *Review* and in various publications of the International City Managers (now Management) Association, little was known about the structure and functioning of council-manager–plan cities: whether, for example, all council-manager plans were created equal with respect to the scope of municipal responsibilities, charter authority, and professional credentials of managers; whether these features varied over time with changes in the size and demographics of the city; whether manager-plan cities were more likely than others to be run by "able, public spirited, non-political councils" (Childs 1952, p. 189); or whether, finally, manager-plan cities were more efficient than non–manager-plan cities, assuming efficiency was a universal value for which there were agreed-upon standards and adequate data to make systematic comparisons.

There was little attention, additionally, to the consequences of reform and especially to the implications of the administrative state for the workings of popular rule. This was a major theoretical and practical challenge. "Whether popular government will endure," Lowell wrote in the concluding paragraph of *Public Opinion and Popular Government* (1926 [1913], p. 303), "depends on its success in solving its problems, and among these none is more insistent than the question of its capacity both to use and to control experts." Others had since addressed the issue but largely outside the context of municipal government. The literature, Herson

reported (1957, p. 341, note 22), "offer[ed] little evidence [of having] thought through the problem of the expert and his proper role in democratic government." There was scant information on the policy process and on the extent to which, as a result of the reforms, municipal policy making had shifted to the administrative arena; and on whether such shifts, along with other institutional changes affecting elections, parties, and city councils, had reshaped political participation to the detriment of mass publics and to the benefit of the media and of intense policy minorities (interest groups) with special access to the bureaucracy.

This neglect coincided with shifts in professional interests during these years. These in turn reflected major shifts in the public agenda, in particular a more active national government. The change had been foreshadowed during the late nineteenth century. But it was not until World War I and especially until the New Deal and its aftermath that the political science agenda shifted dramatically to the national arena, with a consequent decline in research interest in the city.

By the time Herson's article appeared in 1957, there were already signs of renewed scholarly interest in urban governance. As had been the case in the late nineteenth century, the interest was prompted partly by dramatic changes in the demographics and economics of the nation's cities. Cities were in decline following World War II as population, housing construction, retail trade, service industries, and employment generally shifted from the core to the ring. Although the process had begun decades before, the earlier suburbanization had not outpaced the city (Warner 1978 [1962]). Now deconcentration appeared to be the dominant trend, raising alarms about the future of a society without a dynamic and defining urban culture (Jacobs 1961, Mumford 1961). It raised concerns as well about a still sizable urban population, those left behind and those newly arrived, living in communities with declining physical infrastructures and declining public and private resources, where the old "tenement trail" (Lubell 1952) seemed overgrown and no longer visible, let alone passable.

Reports of a widespread urban crisis prompted a remarkably ambitious set of policy initiatives and policy proposals. Though varied and at times conflicting, these proposals shared the assumption that the private sector alone could not be counted on to preserve and revitalize the city and consequently that the public sector needed to intervene. This meant not only city governments themselves but state and federal governments with their greater taxing and borrowing powers. And it meant more extensive use of government power generally, including government's power to regulate and to coerce.

Most of the early initiatives stressed economic development—for example, the revitalization of central business districts or the construction of industrial parks—using the city's power of eminent domain to assemble the land, public subsidies for new construction or rehabilitation, and tax incentives to encourage retail trade and industry to remain or relocate. Although they stressed economic development, these early initiatives assumed success would be broadly beneficial—that a rising tide would, as it were, improve the lot of citizens generally. Some observers, however, were skeptical, or at least insisted more direct investment in human capital

was also needed. The latter was the main thrust of such federal legislation as the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (P.L. 88-452); the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 (P.L. 87-145); and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-10). It was also, along with economic development, the thrust of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1972, in this instance with the stated congressional objective of "deconcentrating" the city's poor by resettling them in suburban communities (P.L. 93-383, Sec. 101(c)(6); National Commission on Urban Problems 1968; Downs 1973).

Proposals calling for deconcentrating the city's poor had profound implications for urban governance and especially for the way local government was organized in metropolitan areas. As matters stood, the system was highly decentralized, with authority distributed among an at times bewildering array of governments—counties, municipalities, independent school districts, public authorities, and numerous and varied other special districts. This "system" had long been a source of consternation to critics, who insisted there were more rational ways to organize local governments and adapt them to the realities of suburbanization.

As in earlier times, the stress was on institutional engineering and the adjustment of governmental forms to deal with whatever problems cities faced. In this case it was the long-standing recommendation the many units of local government in metropolitan areas be reorganized into a single larger one. Doing so, it was said, would eliminate duplication, allow for greater economies of scale, and reduce competition for population and taxes. It would also broaden perspectives of lawmakers and make it easier for the ordinary citizen to find out who was responsible for what. And, according to one of its champions (Gulick 1957, p. 59), once there was "a single center for coordinated analysis, planning and action," a "rational attack" on the city's "underlying problems" would finally be possible.

Whatever the promise, the metropolitan government movement, as it is sometimes called, has had limited success in the United States. There are exceptions—Unigov in Indianapolis-Marion County and the Miami-Dade County Metropolitan Federation. But even these are at best only approximations of the ideal, since each lacks jurisdiction over important locally administered programs such as education, police, and public housing. For the most part, the nation's system of local government remains highly decentralized, reflecting a political rationality quite different from that underpinning blueprints of how metropolitan government ought to be organized.

Understanding this rationality is at the core of political science—not simply to treat what "ought to happen" but, as Lowell had counseled in his 1910 Presidential Address (p. 3), to determine "what actually occurs," and "to grasp the actual forces at work." Such questions, long a concern in mainstream political science, were now posed increasingly in the literature on urban politics as well—who stood to gain or lose, for example, from metropolitan government; and whether, if adopted, metropolitan governments would operate according to plan, such that the effective distribution of political power actually corresponded to the formal provisions of reform charters. In brief, the study of urban government and politics was now no

longer the stagnant professional backwater described by Herson. Within a decade of Herson's article, there was a substantial and richly empirical literature describing government and politics in the city. It was a literature that was also lively and often quite roiled.

Topics varied. Some scholars addressed institutional matters, including such reform initiatives as the council-manager plan, at-large elections, and administrative reorganization plans, or such reform nemeses as political parties, city councils, and the electoral systems. Others examined major policy initiatives, most notably those in housing, urban renewal, and welfare broadly defined. Methods varied as well. Some investigators produced case studies, rich contextual analyses of individual cities or of discrete policies or political controversies. Others approached the city from more comparative and quantitative perspectives, testing general hypotheses about the causes and consequences of institutions or the relative importance of political, social, and economic variables on policy outcomes.

Although there were widely shared epistemologies and methodologies, the literature was also quite varied and as such difficult to summarize. In this respect, it lacked the unifying vision that pervaded so much of the early literature on municipal government. Still, important themes can be noted and important studies cited, albeit selectively, illustrating the new directions in the study of urban governance.

One was the emphasis on process and the proposition that governing is more than simply acts in the law—a commonplace proposition, except in the earlier literature on the city. It is more than simply acts in the law inasmuch as (*a*) few laws cover all contingencies and none are self-executing, and (*b*) laws are not spontaneous acts. People value different things differently, except perhaps in a utopia or dystopia. Elsewhere, lawmaking involves choices among competing values, interests, and peoples. It typically imposes differential costs and bestows differential benefits on citizens and, in normal course, provokes conflict.

Although politics was thus restored to the literature on urban governance, there was disagreement about what kinds of politics counted and just how much. The disagreements were evident, for example, in the political economy literature and especially in the large-scale comparative studies. These studies typically examined differences in public policy using statistical models to test the relative influence of various factors on outcomes. Few studies, it is true, focused specifically on local as opposed to state or national governments (Fabricant 1952, Dawson & Robinson 1963, Dye 1966). But the methods and the models, as well as the findings, had broader significance for understanding how city governments functioned.

They had significance among other reasons because they gave pause to easy generalizations about the importance of government and politics. Many studies suggested that socioeconomic variables such as income and education were, statistically, far more significant in the policy equation than were governmental and political ones. (See, however, Lineberry & Fowler 1967, Fry & Winters 1970.) This did not mean, as even investigators admitted, that politics was irrelevant or that only fools contested forms of government, as Alexander Pope suggested long ago. These were statistical models designed to test relationships among variables, and the results depended heavily on the kinds of data and measures employed—whether,

for example, they adequately captured, in all their complexities, such important political and governmental variables as party competition, the budget process, or administrative rule making. Even so, the findings were a powerful reminder that one could not assume politics and government somehow vaguely counted, and that it would be very difficult to demonstrate empirically they did.

These questions also figured prominently in the debates over interest groups and the structure of power in city government. For some, interest groups were key, not only as the principal unit of analysis, as in sociological research, but as the principal explanatory variable in political and governmental life as well. According to Bentley's influential *The Process of Government*, politics was essentially conflict between groups, each pursuing its own interests, and governments, whatever their form or composition, were nothing more than the "adjustments or balance" of these interests. There was no "interest of society as a whole" and little by way of an independent, autonomous role for public officials, whether appointed or elected. Even in their roles as "umpires," government officials would at best be reactive, without a life force of their own, responding to problems and proposals defined by others, and enacting policies that simply registered the strength of competing pressure groups (Bentley 1908, pp. 258–71). Although Bentley was neglected at the time by political scientists (Barnes 1921, pp. 493–94), interest group theory emerged as a dominant perspective on politics in the post World War II period (Latham 1952, Truman 1958).

For many group theorists, especially those who wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "the adjustment of the conflicting interests always emerge[d] in one specific manner, namely the domination of the economically inferior majority by the economically powerful minority" (Barnes 1921, p. 494). The claim, or an important variant thereof, soon emerged as commonplace in the literature on local government and politics. In 1929, for example, Robert and Helen Lynd's pioneering study *Middletown* reported that business dominated civic affairs in Muncie, Indiana. Their findings were subsequently affirmed in numerous other community studies—in Atlanta as well as in Newburyport (MA), in Morris (IL) as well as in Philadelphia and Seattle, and in the Lynds' own follow-up study of Muncie, *Middletown in Transition*, published in 1937.

Stratification theory, as it came to be known, pictured communities as divided along socioeconomic lines (Polsby 1963). A single, upper-class group ruled in its own interests and against the competing interests of the lower class. The upper class ruled, moreover, by controlling public officials, who, though endowed with legal authority, were in practice subordinate to the ruling class. In Muncie, for example, "the business class [had] . . . little respect for local politics and politicians," viewing the "typical city official as a man of meager caliber" whom the "inner business ignore[d] economically and socially and used politically" (Lynd & Lynd 1937, cited in Polsby 1963, p. 16). Like interest group theory, stratification theory restored politics to the governing process, but it did so, ironically, by assigning little or no independent role to public officials.

These findings were questioned on several grounds, not least the assumption, common in the stratification literature, that political power and social economic

status were one and the same, with the former inherent in the latter. This, critics noted, could not be taken for granted, any more than it could it be assumed the unequal distribution of resources such as money, social status, or prestige necessarily produced an unequal distribution of power. All resources were inert. Even if used to influence political outcomes, there were no guarantees they would be used effectively, or if so in one case, thus used in all. All these were questions to be studied empirically and, as Sayre & Polsby urged, by examining the "changes in behavior brought about by the actions of one person upon another." And they were to be studied by observing and analyzing "concrete decisions," not by simply reporting who informants believed had power (Sayre & Polsby 1965, p. 129).

Investigators who studied actual policy making reported a far less structured and determinative process than those reported by stratification or interest group theorists. "No single ruling elite dominates the political and governmental system of New York City," Sayre & Kaufman concluded from their classic study, *Governing New York City: Politics in the Metropolis* (1960, pp. 709–38). It was, rather, a highly decentralized system with policies emanating from "a multiplicity of decision centers" (p. 710). It was intensely political as well. The "system is . . . vigorously and incessantly competitive. The stakes of the city's politics are large, the contestants are numerous and determined, the rules of competition are known to and enforced against each other by the competitors themselves, and the city's electorate is so uncommitted to any particular contestant as to heighten competition for the electorate's support or consent" (p. 709–10). Interest groups were an important part of this. But "even they [were] compelled by the nature of the rules to accept roles as satellites," competing with other interest groups and with government and political officials to influence those "invested by the rules with the formal authority to legitimize decisions" (p. 712).

Though in many respects sui generis, New York City's government and politics were similar in many ways to those reported in other communities (Polsby 1971, Banfield & Wilson 1966). In New Haven, for example, Dahl and his colleagues found a fragmented system with numerous small groups active within, but seldom across, specific policy areas (Dahl 1961). It was a highly fluid system, one that had changed radically over the long term and in the short term was characterized by shifting political coalitions that often formed and re-formed from one set of issues to the next.

It was a system, further, in which public officials often acted autonomously and not simply as agents of a ruling elite or of interest groups; one in which public officials often used and even manipulated the private sector to advance their own policy goals. Although it was hard to define, Dahl and his associates pointed up the importance of political leadership, and how different city officials used the same resources with varying degrees of skill and success. These included not only the mayor, who was the central actor in the account, but city bureaucrats, in staff and line agencies alike, some of whom were quintessentially bureaucratic, others of whom were independent, imaginative, and innovative.

It was a system, finally, that was generally accessible to citizens, even though in normal course "the great body of citizens use[d] their political resources at a low level," leaving the active political stratum to a relatively small group of professionals (Dahl 1961, p. 305). There were a number of reasons for this, among them demographic changes in the city. Population changes often gave rise to new groups demanding access to the system. In some instances they might act largely on their own, relying principally on the mobilization of large numbers of similarly situated citizens or on the dedication, determination, and intensity of a small, newly engaged policy minority. Or they might be stirred into action by political mavericks, who are typically unconstrained by the prevailing rules of the game (Coleman 1957). In other instances, they might be courted by members of the political stratum hoping to transform a losing coalition into a winning one (Schattschneider 1942, Riker 1962). Most disagreements, it is true, were probably settled within the activist stratum—there are powerful incentives to do so (Vidich & Bensman 1958). But it is difficult to contain conflict entirely, especially when the stakes are high, as they are in large cities, and when there are what Dahl termed "slack resources" (1961, p. 305), including individuals and groups to be mobilized on behalf of one's political goals.

Conflict was difficult to contain additionally because of elections. Many citizens, of course, do not participate in elections or any other form of politics. But many do, and elections, like the hangman's noose, wonderfully focus the minds of public officials, serving as both a constraint and as a stimulus for those who hold or seek office. Elections are an occasion for heightened information on policies and performance across a wide range of issues, and although the information may be imperfect and citizens less than fully attentive, elections are unrivaled in this respect. They also provide a periodic opportunity for citizens to pause and reflect on their corporate responsibilities and to voice and to vote their support of candidates and issues. Moreover, as regularly scheduled occasions for public debate, elections can also be used by mavericks and outsiders to reach a broader audience as well as to distract regular candidates, cost them votes, and perhaps even be part of a coalition that throws the rascals out.

On the other hand, political leaders can also use elections to test and legitimate their policy agendas. Admittedly electoral mandates are notoriously ambiguous and it is difficult to establish precise causal links between the vote and specific policy outcomes. Elections, other than referenda and initiatives, are not structured for such analysis. Still, elections generally are an important occasion for proposing and debating broad policy initiatives, especially those affecting large numbers of citizens, widely shared values, or the future character of the community. And campaigns and elections, including but not limited to the actual vote, are important feedback mechanisms that may prompt leaders to continue on their current course or abandon it altogether. Or they may cause leaders to pause and redirect their efforts, as happened in New Haven when political costs of the city's urban renewal projects prompted its political leaders to embark on an ambitious anti-poverty project (Murphy 1971).

THE LEGACY

Much has been rediscovered in the "Lost World of Municipal Government" since the publication some 40 years ago of Herson's article, not least the re-affirmation of the proposition that there is more to governing cities than finely drawn municipal charters, carefully drafted ordinances, or the prescriptions of scientific management. Whether this constitutes a lost innocence is doubtful, though the view that governing was largely a matter of well-structured institutions and formal acts in the law is simpler and less cluttered and than what has been reported since. Indeed, its very simplicity may be key to its widespread appeal.

Although the literature is now richer and more nuanced—especially with respect to such core political science questions as who, if anyone, rules—the agenda is far from exhausted. The number and range of unresolved research questions remain as substantial today as when Sayre & Polsby (1965) proposed a scholarly agenda for "urban political science" some 35 years ago. Sayre & Polsby outlined several broad areas for investigation—a partial list includes "comparative analysis of community power," "emerging metropolitan systems," "political parties in urban America," "external political forces," and "urbanization and democracy in emergent nations"—and within each area, they suggested discrete research questions political scientists might profitably explore.

The agenda is comprehensive, so there is little warrant to expand it. The task, rather, is to revisit some of the questions posed by Sayre & Polsby in the context of broad issues raised earlier in this essay. I have in mind particularly whether the administrative state and federalism now constrain local self-government in ways akin to, yet radically different from, the constraints urged by municipal reformers at the close of the nineteenth century. Municipal reformers, it will be recalled, urged the separation of politics and administration, declared municipal affairs to be principally an administrative concern, and thereby hoped to limit the role of political parties, voters, and elected public officials. At the same time, they urged greater reliance on municipal administrators chosen for their special knowledge and protected by the classified service from the vagaries and uncertainties of politics.

Conditions have changed substantially since then. The public sector has grown and the role of state governments in local matters has expanded—even allowing for the earlier state legislative "meddling" that spurred the so-called Home Rule Movement. So too has the role of the national government, partly a heritage of the New Deal but more especially of the Great Society and its aftermath. Always supreme constitutionally, these governments are now major actors in such areas as public education, land use regulation, environmental policy, local law enforcement, and public health and welfare. All this, in turn, has arguably resulted in a narrowing of local discretion, especially as a result of the rules, regulations, and policies adopted by national and state administrators. Acting under broad mandates and delegations from their respective legislatures, these administrators do more than simply fill in the details, as judges sometimes claim, and even when simply filling in the details they constrain local officials in substantial ways.

Or so it seems from an admittedly casual review of administrative regulations, case law, and the public and private complaints of local public officials. But the case remains speculative, since there are no systematic data on these or competing perspectives. It may be, for example, that a rising tide lifts all boats, which is to say that an increase in the size of the public sector generally may increase authority and power at all levels of government. Or it may be, as Grodzins (1966) once suggested, that professionalism binds bureaucrats across governments, thus increasing the chances of some local input in the process, albeit not from local elected officials. Still, the broad issues warrant an occasional nod, to see not only whether local discretion has been narrowed but also the conditions under which this has occurred or is likely to occur. Interest groups with a national or statewide constituency might be one factor, since they might find it more economical to deal with one or a few governments rather than thousands. So too would external diseconomies, i.e., problems that spill over local governmental boundaries and require intervention by a more comprehensive jurisdiction. Still others might be "leveling" effects of democratic politics, or the trade-offs made by local elected officials wishing to shift their community's financial burdens elsewhere, albeit at the expense of local autonomy.

To pose these questions is not to imply American local government is in imminent danger of being reduced to parish pump politics. But the trends warrant investigation, as does the prior question, namely what if anything is at stake? Would it really matter whether local voters and local elected officials were limited still further in what they could do on their own? And what would it mean if cities and local governments generally were reduced to the status of administrative units that simply enforced the policy mandates of state and national governments? To what extent would such a shift benefit organized as opposed to unorganized interests, or at least those who can afford to mobilize statewide or nationally? And is it the case, finally, that shifting so much policy making to national and state agencies has produced the kind of governmental system advocated by earlier reformers, namely one in which policy making is insulated from local electoral politics—whether or not, as before, such an outcome is based on hesitations about the character and competence of today's urban voters and their ability to govern themselves?

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