

State of the City: Is It Governable?

Lincoln Steffens described New York City as "the leading exponent of the Great American anti-bad government movement."

That was in 1904, but the penchant of New Yorkers for finding fault with the management of their city and tinkering with its governmental machinery has not abated. Since the five boroughs were consolidated in 1898, there have been at least 16 major studies of city government—five in the past five years and three substantial charter revisions; in 1901, 1938 and 1963. Proposals for further changes are to be submitted to the voters next fall by a Charter Revision Commission.

The popular notion that New York is "ungovernable" has been refuted in numerous scholarly appraisals, most notably by the late Wallace S. Sayre and Herbert Kaufman in their classic text, "Governing New York City." "No other American city approaches the magnitude, scope, variety and complexity of the city's governmental tasks and accomplishments," Sayre and Kaufman wrote in 1960. "... Every day, the government of the city competently discharges a staggering burden of responsibility."

Expectations, however, have risen more rapidly than the city's capacity to fulfill them. By 1972, according to a Gallup Poll, six out of ten New Yorkers thought their city government was working poorly. Less than one in ten believed it was working well. The ferment of the sixties had led New Yorkers to focus on what was widely regarded as the city government's growing inaccessibility, rigidity and inefficiency.

The search for remedies points to what at first glance appear to be opposite directions. The city itself must be made manageable through reliance on smaller units, closer to the people they serve (decentralization); at the same time, many urban problems can be tackled effectively only in the larger context of the greater metropolitan region (regionalism). Thus viewed, greater decentralization of city government and urban-suburban regionalism complement each other.