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Chapter 1

Why Study Urban Politics?

This is a book about how cities are governed, about the importance of institutions in urban governance and about the different goals cities prioritize. The book pursues an argument reaffirming the position of institutional theory in urban politics as a means of uncovering the structural and normative underpinnings of urban governance.

Urban politics is city politics. It defines and regulates how the city should be organized, how it should allocate its resources and how – and by whom – it should be governed. Central government policies play an important role in providing well-being for the citizens of a country but in many countries it is local authorities that make most of the key decisions related to welfare and public service. When we say ‘city politics’ it is with the understanding that urban politics strictly speaking refers to politics at the local level.

This chapter gives a brief introduction to the book. It presents urban politics as a field of study and introduces urban governance and institutional theory.

Urban politics

The first question to address is: why should we bother ourselves with urban politics? There are obvious reasons for us as citizens to understand who makes the essential decisions shaping the city we live in and perhaps to try to influence those decisions. As citizens we should be concerned about urban politics because most of the decisions that shape our existence tend to be made at the local level. Also, many of us tend to be most concerned about issues closest to us. There are other reasons for us as social scientists to do research on urban politics.
The literature offers a couple of clues to this issue. Urban politics, writes Clarence Stone (2008: 285), ‘is a matter of understanding how a changing mix of forces is related to an evolving urban condition’. Cryptic as this may sound, Stone’s argument is that urban politics is about the confluence of economic, social and political forces and how they shape city life. Urban politics offers a more direct and more visible manifestation of these forces and how they shape a public space and collective action, compared to the level of the nation state.

Peter John (2008) suggests that urban politics has two important advantages to most other areas of political science: propinquity and numerosity. Propinquity ‘denotes the closeness of the urban space where actors interact and tend to be small in number’ (John 2008: 21). In urban politics, distance – whether between electors and elected or between bureaucrats and clients – is always small and the immediate nature and visibility of policy choices provides an understanding of the role of politics in shaping society.

Numerosity means that there are multiple cases to be studied within the same national context. The researcher can survey local governments in a country and use statistical methods to uncover relationships between, for instance, political and economic variables that are not detectable in qualitative analyses, let alone case studies. More importantly, perhaps, this research can be conducted with control for variables that are known to explain common political-science phenomena, such as political culture, economic variables and welfare indicators. By comparing policy choice in local authorities in a country, those variables are controlled for since they affect all local authorities similarly or roughly similarly.

The intriguing image of urban politics is thus that it matters, it is easily researchable and it lends itself to a variety of methods. True, there is less drama and appeal about urban politics than that which surrounds the politics of global warming or the fight against terrorism, but it still has much to offer in terms of contextual richness and understanding politics at a close distance. For nothing else, a bus ticket is cheaper than an airline ticket, as Peter John argues (John 2008).
Why Study Urban Politics?

Urban politics is to considerable degree shaped by the national context in which it is embedded. Every national environment has its own specific institutional arrangements, its own national policy towards cities, its own political culture and tends to foster its own urban political economy and types of urban regimes. This makes comparative analysis and theory building difficult (Ashford 1975, Denters and Rose 2005, DiGaetano 2006, Keating 1991, Pierre 2005). However, urban politics has always been rich in theory (Judge et al. 1995, Davies and Imbroscio 2008) and while those theories appear, as theories, to be applicable to cities in almost all national settings, they are more reflective of the context which they draw upon than is often realized. This theoretical ethnocentricity explains why there occur ‘misfits’ when the theory is applied to local government in other national contexts (Davies 2003, Harding 1995). Theory does not travel as well as is sometimes assumed, particularly not theories on urban politics.

The research field of urban politics is defined by a particular institutional level, the local level. Thus, it is not defined in relation to any particular theory. This has helped make urban politics as a field of academic enquiry much more inter-disciplinary than most other social-science research fields. While urban politics has a natural kinship with political science, it is also closely related to sociology, geography and economics. Since urban politics is concerned with issues like what shapes urban policy choice; or what accounts for differences in life chances in different parts of a city; or the tensions between different strategies of urban planning and land use, urban politics has few problems in incorporating variables which typically speak to sociology or economics or geography.

Urban politics has for long been an established subfield of political science but the prominence of that subfield has varied considerably across time and space. In the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, urban politics was ‘hot’ (Orr and Johnson 2008). This was when most of the salient issues in political science were urban politics issues, as was the case with the debate among pluralists and elite theorists at that time (Dahl 1961, Hunter 1953, Polsby 1963). But the American local authorities
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suffer from limited autonomy and institutional fragmentation (Keating 1991). When federal policies and programmes towards the cities declined and, finally, all but disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s, urban politics both as a research field and a practice experienced a similar decline (Orr and Johnson 2008). There was a significant rediscovery of the urban political scene with Clarence Stone’s seminal book *Regime Politics* (Stone 1989) and urban regime theory has been a leitmotif in US urban politics for much of the 1990s and 2000s.

The European experience paints a rather different picture. Political mobilization is higher in Europe, local authorities are comparatively speaking more resourceful and the political discourse is shaped by ideology to a much higher degree than in the United States. As a result, urban politics did not experience the same decline as in the United States. In the 1980s when American urban politics was clearly in decline, European cities in most countries (with the UK as an important exception) were doing relatively well (see Le Galès 2002). Thus, urban politics was an exciting research field and remains very much a dynamic subfield of political science.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the rapidly growing interest in public management reform during the past couple of decades has to some extent redefined the urban politics agenda. With Ronald Reagan in the US and Mrs Thatcher and John Major, then Tony Blair in the UK leading or pursuing the public management campaign which played out to a large extent at the local level where public services are delivered, urban managerialism in different guises has become a significant part of urban politics (see Chapter 3). The focus on managerial issues has been so strong that it has almost crowded out more traditional urban politics traditional issues like urban planning, policy choice and the extent to which ‘politics matters’ (Sharpe and Newton 1984).

American urban politics research has been criticized for being driven by fads and political agendas (Jones 1989: 35):

> [W]hen there are riots in cities, we write much about social justice, the entrance of new participants, and racial
discrimination. When cities cannot balance their budgets, the fiscal crisis literature gets a boost. When city economies are in the doldrums, books on economic development appear.

The interest in current affairs and issues is largely a valid account of urban politics not only in the US but also in much of Europe. However, urbanists are not entirely focused on current developments; in both America and Europe much energy has been also devoted to develop various theories of urban politics and urban governance (see Judge et al. 1995).

From urban politics to urban governance

Urban politics in many countries is now gradually turning towards urban governance. This process began in the 1990s along with a growing interest in ‘governance’ more broadly among academics, practitioners and politicians, not least in Britain (Rhodes 1996, Stoker 1998). Governance, unlike ‘government’, looks at the interplay between state and society and the extent to which collective projects can be achieved through a joint public and private mobilization of resources. Politically, this means that the public sector does not have to deliver all public services itself; it can coordinate service production among public actors at different institutional levels, private actors, NGOs and other potential participants. Academically, governance initially redirects attention from institutions to processes and from the exercise of political and legal authority to public entrepreneurship and public–private partnership. This was usually described as a ‘shift from government to governance’; an unfortunate choice of words as government continued to play a key, albeit changed role in the provision of services. Furthermore, outside the UK many countries had had long experiences with different forms of institutionalized interaction between the state and actors in its environment and could not understand the novelty of this arrangement or the purported ‘shift’. Rather, what had changed was the role of government in governance (Pierre and Peters 2000).
Governance in this gestalt fits perfectly with the research agenda in urban politics where public–private partnerships and other forms of exchange between local authorities and their environment had long been in place. Thus, urban governance offered a theory or perspective to describe the exercise of political authority in the city and the possibilities and perils associated with different forms of public–private interaction.

In Chapter 2 we discuss urban governance at some length. Before we proceed to that discussion we must briefly discuss how institutions fit into the process-oriented nature of governance.

**Institutions and governance: an odd couple, perhaps**

We began this chapter with saying that the overall purpose of the book is to show the contribution of institutional theory in the study of urban governance. How do institutions blend with governance conceived of a process of blending public and private resources?

Again, we will discuss this issue at length in the next chapter. For now, we must note that the concept of institution has multiple meanings in institutional theory. One meaning is structure, organization; institutions represent organizational continuity and define the range of choice and behaviour of the organization’s members. The second meaning of institution is norm, value, rules and practices. This is obviously a more subtle and less tangible interpretation of institution, but rules, values and norms constrain behaviour just as much as structure or organization does. Thus, what holds together the two meanings of institution is that they both ‘shape and constrain’ (Thelen and Steinmo 1991) social behaviour. Most importantly, institutional theory looks at the interplay between these two meanings, that is, how structures become carriers of social norms and values and how those norms and values become institutionalized (see Peters 1999).
With this brief elaboration of institution it should be clear that there are no inconsistencies between institution and governance. Both meanings of institution are relevant to the study of governance. Political structures are important players in the governance process since they define collective goals and coordinate public and private efforts towards those goals. Institution in the more abstract sense matters too; as this book will show, different norms and values defined as governance goals shape much of what actors can contribute towards those goals.

* * *

No single book can cover urban governance in all countries of the world, either conceptually or empirically. The purpose of this text is to describe different models of governance with regard to the objectives of that governance. Therefore, the issue of which countries are included becomes less important than if the book had been more empirically oriented. The main empirical models for the analysis of urban politics as a practice and as a field of research are the UK and the United States. There are numerous comparative observations from other national contexts like Scandinavia and Southeast Asia, but most of the analysis covers urban governance in the former two countries. Governance as described in the models will play out differently in different national contexts; pro-growth governance in Italy will, perhaps, be differently organized and conducted than similar governance in Finland. Hopefully the book will serve as a framework or a catalyst for more in-depth empirical research on urban governance in different types of national contexts so that the broader theoretical perspective can be confronted with empirically rich studies.

Furthermore, it almost goes without saying that there are many aspects of urban politics and governance which have not been given due attention in the book. The urban setting is not reserved for benevolent and civilized human interaction. It is also the scene for public disorder, riots, crime, homelessness and surveillance, all of which are issues high on the contemporary political agenda in many countries.
Important as these issues certainly are they are only discussed very briefly in the book.

**Organization of the book**

The remainder of the book is organized as follows. Chapter 2 elaborates the analyses of urban governance and institutional theory and shows how the two theoretical perspectives can be integrated. In Chapters 3–6 four different models of urban governance are elaborated: managerial governance, corporatist governance, pro-growth governance and welfare governance. These four models depart from four different overarching objectives of urban governance. Each model is assessed in terms of its goals, objectives, instruments, and outcomes.

Chapters 7 and 8 approach urban politics from a different point of departure compared to the four models. Chapter 7, ‘The Decline of Urban Politics?’, presents an elaborated discussion about overarching recent changes in urban politics in most western countries. The first section deals with the changing cast of actors in urban politics, whereas the second section addresses the changing urban political agenda. These two developments are obviously closely related; new issues bring in new actors and similarly new forms of political participation help put new issues on the political agenda. Thus, emerging forms of social movements and citizen protest will be discussed alongside the changing character of urban political issues such as environmental protection, migration, and the sustainability of cities in light of these powerful changes. Following this discussion, the chapter looks at the changing role of professionals in urban politics and city administration. These groups seek to insulate their areas from political guidance so that professional norms can dictate the design of city services. These groups offer powerful resistance against cutbacks in public spending and thus pose a significant challenge to the urban political elite. The chapter closes with a discussion concerning the extent to which the current ‘managerialism’, coupled
with the other developments described in the chapter, undercuts the traditional role of elected officials in urban politics and what scope of policy choice actually exists for the urban political elite. Issues related to control and accountability will be discussed in this section.

Chapter 8, ‘Cities in Global Governance’, is devoted to an analysis of the challenges to urban governance that the recent internationalization of cities poses. One important consequence of such internationalization is that it tends to detach private businesses from the local political economy. Also, enhancing international networks – for example, in the context of the EU – frequently creates conflict between those who advocate primary concern with the ‘truly’ local issues such as social welfare. The chapter also looks at what drives cities to position themselves as international actors and the local consequences of such strategies in a more general perspective. Obviously, this chapter also discusses the role of the nation state in these processes and the role of the EU in its direct exchange with cities and regions.

Finally, Chapter 9, ‘Conclusions: The Future of Urban Politics’, discusses the analytical utility of the models discussed in the book. The role of local government in these different models of urban governance is assessed. Also, the chapter discusses how tensions between different models of urban governance cause ‘ungovernability’ or ‘governance gaps’ in urban politics. An important conclusion of the analysis is that no city displays all characteristics of any single model of urban governance. The chapter concludes with a more general discussion about possible future directions of urban politics and urban governance, given the previously discussed changes among actors and issues and the growing international complexities in which cities increasingly often find themselves.
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