

WRITING THE RULES TO WIN THE GAME

The Middle-Class Regimes of Municipal Reformers

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Every student of city politics knows the class theory of city government—that middle-class voters supported municipal reform and working-class voters supported machine politics. Although historical narratives support this theory, systematic evidence has been elusive. Historians and political scientists alike have recognized very strong regional differences in styles of city government but lacked an explanation. The authors argue that the class theory, historical narratives, and regional differences may be reconciled. Presence of immigrants and turnout account both for adoption or rejection of reform and for the regional pattern of those decisions.

The founding of the National Municipal League in 1894 marked the organization of a nationwide municipal reform movement. The National Municipal League, the League of American Municipalities, and the Short Ballot Organization promoted the reorganization of local government. Initially, this meant nonpartisanship and citywide elections for members of the city council, who served as the city's "commission." By 1915, the city manager plan had replaced the commission as the model city charter of the National Municipal League (Childs 1965, 4). The league organized conferences on municipal problems, offered speakers and consultants to cities redrafting their city charters, and provided boilerplate editorials and pamphlets to town

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leaders. Within a generation, reformers celebrated scores of triumphs as cities across the country adopted the model city charters the league endorsed (Rice 1977, 52-71; Bridges 1997a, chap. 3). Nevertheless, many cities resisted the appeals of municipal reform, opting for politics as usual. How can we account for the choices cities made?

The answer with longest standing is the class theory of city government. Since Hofstadter (1955) wrote *The Age of Reform*, municipal reform has been understood as a movement of the middle classes. Squeezed between the impoverished immigrant many and the few of ostentatious wealth, the mugwump organized to take control of city government. Later, Banfield and Wilson (1963) elaborated this thought in the "ethos" theory of city politics. Banfield and Wilson argued that the public-regarding values of middle-class WASPs led them to support reform regimes, but the private-regarding working-class/immigrant ethos supported the creation of political machines.

Evidence for the class basis of support for different styles of local government has remained elusive. The theory suggests that cities with more middle-class residents chose reform government, whereas cities with more working-class residents retained politics as usual. Students of city politics who compared the class composition of cities and towns with their forms of government found, at best, weak evidence to support the theory, although strong relationships did appear between immigrant populations and the absence of reform. The same studies revealed resilient relationships between region and reform: In every decade in this century, northeastern cities have tenaciously maintained partisan politics, directly elected mayors, and held district elections for members of the city council. Midwestern cities likewise resisted reform. By contrast, a majority of southern and western cities and towns have chosen reform charters. If class theory provided an argument in need of evidence, discussions of region and reform have enjoyed plentiful evidence in want of a theory.

The failure to find evidence supporting the class theory was particularly frustrating because historical accounts showed for city after city that the middle classes voted for reform charters, but organized labor and less affluent neighborhoods opposed them. The most active opposition everywhere to municipal reform came from the working classes (see, e.g., Weinstein 1968, 107-11; Rice 1977, 19-21, 29; Bridges 1997a, chaps. 3, 5). The narrative evidence about the class basis of opposition to municipal reform is remarkably consistent. Usually, opposition centered on the antidemocratic elements in reformers' proposals. Commission government was opposed as too centralized, a criticism leveled at the small number of commissioners, citywide elections, and the concentration of responsibilities in the council. Reformers also proposed that the new commission governments have greater powers,

particularly taxing powers, than the governments they were replacing, and this also provoked opposition. Commissioners were denounced as “czars” and “kaisers” (and much later, the city manager plan was similarly denounced as a “Hitler” plan because the manager was not elected, nor could he be fired, by the voters) (Bridges 1997a, 1997b). There were famous exceptions to this pattern. Denver’s businessmen loved the city’s boss and abandoned the city’s commission charter (Mitchell 1979). There was also strong working-class support for the social reform mayors such as Hazen Pingree and Golden Rule Jones, as well as reformers with a populist cast (Finegold 1995). Structural reformers, however, found little support among the working classes.

If this is so, why does class fail to appear as a determinant of style of government in cross-sectional studies? We think there are two reasons. First, there was remarkably little variation in the class structure of cities early in the century. The Progressive nation was an industrial one, and nearly every city was overwhelmingly working class. Second, we think reformers were able to win where they could shape the electorate by disfranchising their opponents and were most successful where their opponents were weak at the polls. In some places, this was a straightforward reflection of local society; elsewhere, it was the result of restrictions on suffrage that particularly affected working-class voters and people of color. In the Progressive Era, legal innovations restricting suffrage depressed turnout, and the victories of municipal reform in the South and West came subsequent to suffrage restriction. By 1905, turnout in the West and South was well below turnout in the Northeast and Midwest. Both what we know about targets of disfranchisement and what we know about depressed turnout generally suggest that in low-participation regimes, the working classes and people of color stopped voting, creating southern and western urban electorates considerably more middle class and more WASPy than the adult population. If this is correct, then earlier studies erred by looking at local populations rather than local electorates.

Municipal reformers were successful where they could write the rules to win the game. The argument that municipal reformers succeeded by writing the rules to win the game reconciles long-standing case study evidence about collective preferences for styles of government to regional disparities in collective choices, provides suggestive evidence about the class basis of support for structural reform, and explains regional receptivity (or antipathy) to structural reform. In this article, we do not provide direct evidence of the composition of municipal electorates in the Progressive Era. We are able to show, however, that turnout is systematically related to style of government, as is the presence of immigrants.

We offer two clarifications of our argument at the outset. First, our argument concerns only the adoption of reform charters (commission or city manager government), Holli's (1969, chap. 8) "structural reform." There were many varieties of municipal reform and municipal reformers in the Progressive years—social reformers, socialist politicians, and populist reformers among them. Both structural reformers and those who opposed them were persuaded that the institutional arrangements of local government had important policy consequences for equity, efficiency, and democracy—or their absence. Second, although we argue that working-class voters tended to oppose reform and middle-class voters to support it, we reject the ethos theory that has traditionally accompanied these claims. We think that working-class voters opposed structural reform because they saw in its proposals new institutions that would be less responsive to them. Middle-class voters found reform arguments persuasive because they saw their own interests as aligned with the civic leaders proposing new charters and continued to support reform regimes as they delivered (for a time) growth, quality services, and low taxes (Bridges 1997a).

We begin by reviewing studies seeking the determinants of the adoption of reform charters. The subsequent section provides a historical sketch of efforts by municipal reformers to restrict access to the suffrage. The third section describes our own efforts to sort out these relationships in the decades just after the turn of the century. A concluding discussion reviews our argument and offers some lessons for students of city politics.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CITY GOVERNMENT

A long list of authors have searched for evidence of the relationships between social structure and governmental form. Bernard and Rice (1975) sought evidence that social structure influenced the adoption of reform charters in the period from 1900 to 1924. Looking at the 156 cities with populations of 25,000 in 1900, Bernard and Rice found evidence supporting the predictions of the class theory. Reformers fared poorly in older cities with many foreign-born residents and did better in cities that were small, young, native born, and of relatively high socioeconomic status. However, although the relationships were in the predicted direction, they were "only marginally significant." Bernard and Rice did not provide data about regional differences, arguing that "region" embraced "a wide set of historical and demographic variables not present in our model" (p. 166).

Knoke (1982) examined the adoption and subsequent abandonment of commission and city manager charters by the nation's 267 largest cities in the

period from 1900 to 1942. Searching for demographic determinants of government style, Knoke found no significant effects for the presence of Catholics and a relationship to the presence of manufacturing in opposition to the class theory. The strongest determinant of transitions in style of government was regional adoption percentages. In other words, the more neighboring cities had reform charters, the more likely additional cities were to adopt municipal reform. Regional differences were the result of "neighborhood effects," arising "not from social differences" but from "some type of initiation or contagion" (Knoke 1982, 1666).

A different argument about regional differences in the Progressive era was offered by Shefter (1983). Shefter observed marked differences in the adoption of nonpartisanship by western states (where nonpartisanship was favored) and by midwestern and northeastern states (where parties successfully resisted nonpartisanship). Using California as a prototype for the region, Shefter argued that the weakness of party organizations in the west in the late 19th century made the region more receptive to calls for nonpartisanship and other elements of the Progressive reform agenda.

Other authors examined these relationships at mid-century. Gordon (1968) found a strong relationship between the presence of immigrants and mayor-council government in 268 big cities in 1960 and thought that this was the straightforward result of immigrants' sensible attachment to a government responsive to their needs. Kessel (1962) saw in the same group of cities that the very largest retained mayor-council government, perhaps because their greater size and diversity required more political management. Smaller cities tended more to reform charters, perhaps because greater homogeneity and consensus made delegation to managers and commissioners a more acceptable course.

Wolfinger and Field (1966) surveyed 309 cities with populations more than 50,000 in 1960 and examined the relationships between foreign stock population and various measures of class, on one hand, and at-large elections, nonpartisan elections, city manager government, and other indices of structural reform, on the other hand. They found that regional effects swamped the influence of income, class structure, and ethnicity nationwide, but the hypothesized relationships were nonexistent within regions. "The salient conclusion to be drawn from these data," Wolfinger and Field wrote, "is that one can do a much better job of predicting a city's political forms by knowing what part of the country it is in than by knowing anything about the composition of its population" (p. 323). Regional differences might be explained by the attachment of those in older cities (and hence, the Midwest and Northeast) to the status quo. Charter writers in new cities in the West were likely to be moved by "contemporary political fashions" (Wolfinger and Field 1966,

324). In the South, "most municipal institutions seem to be corollaries of the region's traditional preoccupation with excluding Negroes from political power" (Wolfinger and Field 1966, 325).

Working with the same data set, Lineberry and Fowler (1967) similarly found no significant class differences between reform and nonreform cities. Lineberry and Fowler took issue with Wolfinger and Field's (1966) cross-sectional analysis: The independent variables (taken from the 1960 census) were put to ahistorical use if the dependent variable (institutional arrangements) was the result of "decisions made ten to fifty years" earlier (p. 703). As for region, in their view, "geographical subdivisions" could only be of interest to political scientists "because they are differentiated on the basis of attitudinal or socioeconomic variables" (Lineberry and Fowler 1967, 703).

Finally, Dye and MacManus (1976) examined the relationship between social structure and governmental form in 1970. Contrary to the findings of other authors, Dye and MacManus found that their independent variables were stronger predictors within regions than nationally. Alas, rather than revealing similar relationships, different independent variables were discovered to be important for different regions. Ending, like their predecessors, with a whimper rather than a bang, Dye and MacManus concluded, "The ambiguity in the prior literature is a product of the complexity of the factors involved in determining governmental structure" (p. 269).

Taken together, these efforts to find evidence of relationships between social structure and form of city government present weak and contradictory evidence about social class, stronger evidence about the presence of immigrants and resistance to reform, and resilient, persistent patterns of regional difference.

We present here a unified narrative of municipal reform. We call the narrative unified because a single pair of variables accounts for outcomes across the nation, explaining both choices for reform and resistance to it and the consequent regional pattern of these choices. We find that the presence/absence of immigrants and turnout (representing more and less participatory regimes) account both for choices to adopt or resist reform and for the regional pattern of these choices. Where there were immigrants and high participation, there was resistance to reform. Where participation was low and immigrants few, there was greater receptivity to reform.

One consequence of this argument is that, despite the disappointments of the literature, we continue to think that the Anglo middle class was at the center of municipal reform, much as we might say that the Anglo middle class has been at the center of the Republican Party. How Anglo middle-class constituents came to have that special relation to municipal reform is in good part a story of how middle-class Anglo electorates were created in the presence of

considerably more diverse populations. In the first two decades of this century, that was accomplished through suffrage restriction.

MUNICIPAL REFORMERS AND SUFFRAGE RESTRICTION

The municipal reform movement was, from its beginnings in the middle of the 19th century, associated with efforts to restrict popular participation in politics. Banfield and Wilson (1963, 141) reported for Boston that "many leaders of reform were leaders of the Immigration Restriction League." In New York and elsewhere, antipathy toward immigrants took programmatic form in alliance with nativists, advocacy of immigration restriction, support for very long residency requirements for immigrant voters, voter registration, and nonpartisanship (Bridges 1986, chap. 7).

By the end of the century, these sentiments found adherents beyond the municipal reform movement. As Hofstadter (1955, 178) delicately phrased it, the mugwump "had begun to question universal suffrage out of a fear that traditional democracy might be imperiled by the decline of ethnic homogeneity." Later, nativism was given an intellectual veneer with the development of eugenics, the "science" of improving the quality of the population. In the Northeast, the targets of this concern were the most recent immigrants to the United States. "The cheap stucco manikins from Southeastern Europe," wrote Eugene Ross (father of modern sociology), "do not really take the place of the unbegotten sons of the granite men who fell at Gettysburg and Cold Harbor" (Violas 1973, 54).

Municipal reformers and other advocates of regulating suffrage shared three motivations: opposition to corruption in politics, ethnocentrism, and antipathy to poorer voters. Vigorous efforts to regulate and restrict voting met with widespread success in state legislatures. Registration was the most frequently adopted requirement. In its least inhibiting form, registration was permanent, but in many states, the more burdensome requirement of periodic registration was enacted. Literacy tests were another popular innovation. By 1908, eight southern, four western, and three northern states had literacy tests; another three states adopted literacy tests by 1924 (McGovney 1949, 59-60). The secret ballot, welcomed in some places for freeing the lower classes from intimidation, served in others to disfranchise the illiterate or not-literate-enough. Finally, states had widely varying laws specifying those crimes for which citizens lost the privilege of voting. Even a glance at these laws suggests their possible abuse. For example, some states provided that

anyone currently in jail (even for vagrancy or other misdemeanors) lost the right to vote.

In the southern and border states, suffrage restriction was, first, openly and emphatically in the service of white supremacy and, second, directed at the potential supporters of populism and other alleged radicalisms, poorer white workers and farmers. The *Dallas Morning News*, for example, “endorsed disfranchisement of Negroes and the ‘agrarian agitators of the large cities’ ” in 1891 (Kousser 1974, 203 n.30). Thus, the restrictions adopted in the southern and border states disfranchised many poorer white voters as well as nearly all black voters. In Alabama, for example, property ownership delivered potential voters from the literacy test; in Georgia, “after 1898, when other devices were adopted to curtail the Negro vote, the function of the poll tax . . . was to exclude . . . whites of low economic condition” (McGovney 1949, 129, 120). Urban voters were also special targets: In Texas, secret ballot legislation affected only the state’s 10 largest cities (Kousser 1974, 103). Most effective among disfranchising laws were the poll tax and the white primary (and, earlier, the grandfather clause), central to the regimes of V. O. Key’s *Southern Politics* but not exclusive to the states of the former confederacy (New Mexico, Arizona, Rhode Island, and Maryland also had poll taxes).

Western states led the union in granting the franchise to women, but in the same states, large population groups were barred from the polls. Asians and Native Americans could not vote in any of the 11 western states, and Mormons were banned from the polls in Nevada, Idaho, and Utah (Bakken 1990; Almaguer 1994, 162, 186). Arizona, California, Wyoming, Colorado, and Oregon adopted both registration and literacy requirements; Washington also had a literacy test. In Arizona, registration was particularly difficult. In each of these states, Mexican-Americans were the particular targets of literacy testing. Hispanics in New Mexico so strongly opposed literacy or education requirements for voting that the state constitution prohibited them (McGovney 1949, 59-60). Especially relevant to municipal reformers, in California, only “freeholders” could vote on city charters (Bridges 1997a, 67).

The potential targets of disfranchisement were more vulnerable in southern, border, and western states than elsewhere because they were lacking partisan protection. By contrast, New York’s Italian-Americans, whose presence caused Ross such chagrin, were already employed at public works and voting for Tammany. In New Haven and Philadelphia, where Democratic machines failed to recruit Italian-Americans, Italian-Americans were voting for the Republicans (Dahl 1960, chap. 2). Whether their votes were cast for Republicans or Democrats, party allegiance protected immigrant voters from strict enforcement of literacy testing or other disfranchising laws. By contrast, from the municipal reformers’ perspective, suffrage restriction was appeal-

ing because the most ardent opposition to structural reform came from working-class voters.¹

The history of municipal reform in Texas suggests the importance of suffrage restriction for the success of municipal reform. The state's voter registration law of 1891 "was a direct response to the outcome of the Dallas city election" of that year, in which the victory was heavily dependent on African-American and lower-class Anglo support. Angry Democratic Party leaders "rushed to Austin" to secure passage of the voter registration bill (Kousser 1974, 203). The most widely celebrated case of reform government, Galveston's commission plan, was installed in 1901, after a hurricane devastated the port. Galveston's government was not chosen by the city's voters but was awarded to the city by the state legislature, over substantial popular objections, as a condition of poststorm assistance (Rice 1975). Elsewhere in Texas, although proposals for reorganizing local governments had been promoted by municipal reformers since the late 1880s, no city adopted a reform charter until after the passage of the Terrell election law in 1903 (Rice 1977, appendix). The Terrell law and its 1905 sequel together provided for a poll tax to be paid six months before an election, as well as for the secret ballot (Kousser 1974, 208). Terrell legislation had dramatic effects on urban electorates (white voters as well as African-Americans). In Houston, for example, almost 60% of registered voters disappeared from the rolls between 1900 and 1904. In Houston, Austin (Staniszewski 1977, 18-29), and Beaumont (Isaac 1975), the prospects of reformers brightened as participation in local politics declined. These events lead us to suspect that participation and resistance to municipal reform were related, a relationship we explore in the next section.

CHOOSING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The preceding discussion suggests that municipal reformers were attentive to the institutional arrangements of politics and consistently worked to write the rules of politics to their advantage. Like them, we think municipal reform enjoyed greater success, other things being equal, in cities in which turnout was low prior to the fight over adopting reform than in cities in which turnout was high. In this section, we examine evidence for this hypothesis in the first three decades of the century.

Structural reformers first promoted the commission form of government. Debates and referenda about the commission form were the stuff of reform politics until the introduction of the city manager plan, and between 1907 and 1915, 421 cities adopted the commission plan. After that year, however,

although additional cities chose commission charters, more cities adopted the city manager plan. Between 1912 (when 4 cities had adopted the manager plan) and 1933, 448 cities adopted manager charters (Rice 1977, 108).

The largest data set reflecting these choices is found in the *Municipal Year Book, 1934*, which reported the form of government of the 310 cities with populations of 30,000 or more in 1930. We used the yearbook report for our investigation. We treated city manager and commission governments as reform and mayor-council governments as nonreform. Because our interest was in local choices of city charters, we eliminated the cities of Pennsylvania, where after 1912, commission government was required by state law for all but the state's three largest cities.

We examined the relationship between the 1934 city charter and three main independent variables: percentage of the population that is foreign born in the census of 1920, percentage of workers in blue-collar industries in the same year, and voting turnout in the presidential election of 1908 in the county in which the city resides (defined as the number of votes cast in the county divided by the number of males age 21 and older). We chose 1908 to measure turnout because it precedes the major fights over the adoption of reform in very nearly all of the yearbook cities. We would have preferred to measure the turnout of municipal electorates, but these data were unavailable. We chose 1920 because there were data for more of the cities on the 1934 list than the 1910 census and because 1920 antedates a majority of the charter decisions tolled in the list.

The 278 cities in our sample were about evenly divided between reform government (commission or city manager) and those with mayor-council government. Table 1 shows the distribution of the forms of government, turnout, and various measures of social structure by region. The strong regional cast to forms of government is apparent here: In the Northeast, two-thirds of all cities retained mayor-council government, as did more than half of mid-western cities, but two out of three southern and western cities chose reform government.

In broad outlines, the regional distribution of foreign-born residents and of 1908 turnout parallel the regional variation in forms of government. Northeastern cities, where reformers were singularly unsuccessful, had a high concentration of foreign-born residents, whereas the foreign-born presence was slight in the reform-dominated South. And turnout was high in the reform-unfriendly Midwest and again very low in the South. The West is a bit of a puzzle here: The percentage of foreign born is about average, and the 1908 turnout is only slightly below average, yet the West was quite hospitable to reform.

TABLE 1: Form of City Government in 1934, by Region

| | <i>North</i> | <i>Midwest</i> | <i>South</i> | <i>West</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|--|--------------|----------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| % of cities with reform government, 1934 | 33.7 | 43.4 | 68.8 | 65.5 | 48.6 |
| % of population foreign born, 1920 | 26.8 | 15.3 | 5.9 | 18.0 | 17.0 |
| Voting turnout, 1908 (%) | 54.6 | 65.0 | 34.8 | 51.0 | 53.3 |
| % of workers in blue-collar industries, 1920 | 71.3 | 68.6 | 68.4 | 63.0 | 68.9 |
| Number of cities | 86 | 99 | 64 | 29 | 278 |

NOTE: Form of government is from the *Municipal Year Book, 1934* for cities of 30,000 or more in 1930. Pennsylvania cities are excluded from the analysis. Foreign-born and blue-collar percentages are from the census of 1920. Voting turnout, defined as the number of votes cast in the 1908 presidential election divided by the number of males age 21 and older, is measured in the county that includes the city.

Blue-collar residents were distributed much more evenly. The nation's cities were overwhelmingly blue collar in every region. There were very few white-collar cities in 1920. Austin, a state capital, boasted little industry; Berkeley, already a university town, was likewise home to relatively more white-collar workers, but cities like them were few and far between. This suggests one reason scholars of the early years of this century found little role for class in their analyses of styles of government: There was precious little variation in the class structure of the nation's cities.

We investigate the relationships between form of government and turnout, percentage foreign born, and the percentage of workers in blue-collar occupations by estimating a logistic regression. The dependent variable in the analysis is a 0-1 indicator of whether the city had reform government in 1934. Results are shown in Table 2.

The first column of Table 2 simply confirms the results from Table 1. Without controlling for any other variables, region has a strong and significant effect on the form of government. The Midwest is slightly more reform than the Northeast (although not significantly so), and the West and South are much more reform.

Turnout has the relationship to reform government that we expected. As hypothesized, where turnout was low in 1908, reformers were more successful than in cities where turnout was high in 1908. For each 10% increase in turnout, the probability of adopting reform declines by 3.3%—thus a city in a county with 70% turnout in 1908 would have been 10% more likely to have nonreform government than a city with 40% turnout in 1908.² Neither the substantive nor the statistical significance of the relationship is overwhelming; the coefficient is significant at the 10% but not the 5% level, and the

TABLE 2: Logistic Regression Results Predicting the 1934 Form of Government

| | (1) | (2) |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Intercept | 0.68** (.23) | -1.85** (0.25) |
| Midwest | -0.41 (0.31) | 0.16 (0.37) |
| South | -1.46** (0.35) | 0.11 (0.59) |
| West | -1.32** (0.45) | -0.74 (0.48) |
| 1908 turnout | | 1.52* (0.88) |
| 1920 % foreign born | | 6.40** (1.87) |

NOTE: Dependent variable: 0 = reform; 1 = mayor/council. Standard errors are in parentheses. $N = 278$ cities with a population of 30,000 or more in 1930 (excluding Pennsylvania cities). Form of government is from the *Municipal Year Book, 1934* for cities of 30,000 or more in 1930. Foreign-born percentage is from the census of 1920. Voting turnout, defined as the number of votes cast in the 1908 presidential election divided by number of males age 21 and older, is measured in the county that includes the city.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$.

difference in reform adoption between high-turnout and low-turnout cities is substantial but not determinative.

Confirming the results of other analysts, the presence of foreign-born residents has a strong relationship to the adoption of reform. For every 10% increase in the percentage foreign born, the likelihood of adopting reform government declines by approximately 14%.

Controlling for the presence of foreign born and 1908 turnout, the independent effects of region largely disappear. The slightly greater success of reformers in the Midwest (relative to the Northeast) and the much greater success of reformers in the South can be accounted for by the weakness of their opponents in these regions, either because there were few foreign-born residents (and thus fewer opponents in the potential electorate) or because turnout was low (and thus fewer opponents in the actual electorate). The West remains slightly (although not statistically significantly) different.³ Reformers in the West were slightly more successful than would be predicted from either percentage foreign born or from the level of turnout.

In additional regressions, we examined the effects of blue-collar industries and of city size on the form of government. Neither of these variables

were significantly related to the presence of reform government (data not shown).

We can retell these relationships in narrative form, adding some observations about political parties. The most vigorous opponents of municipal reform were strong party organizations that controlled, or hoped to control, city governments—the political machines upon which reformers declared war. They resisted the abandonment of ward representation as destructive to their relations with constituents, they resisted reform assaults on corrupt practices, and they resisted assaults on their most reliable sources of votes. In the Northeast, where immigrants were many, turnout high, and parties well organized, voters and party leaders successfully resisted the seductions of the municipal reform movement. In the Midwest too, although immigrants were fewer, high participation and strong parties meant resistance to reform. Elsewhere, political parties were not so well suited to the task. In the South, where popular participation in politics was minimal and one-party politics replaced party competition, boosters of municipal reform made easy progress to their goals.⁴ In the West, there was party competition, but party organizations were very weak, making the West more receptive to reform than its immigrant populations and levels of participation alone predicted.

THE RULES OF POLITICS MATTER IN MUNICIPAL REFORM

Every student of city politics knows the class theory of city government and knows that the middle classes were the heart and soul of municipal reform. Yet aside from the suburbs, evidence for this argument has been maddeningly elusive. Historians, meanwhile, have shown for city after city that the working classes opposed municipal reform, whereas middle-class voters supported it. Historians and political scientists have noted strong and persistent regional variations in receptivity to reform but lacked explanations for them.

We have argued here that historical narratives and the class theory may be reconciled. Middle-class voters were indeed the central supporters of reform regimes, and working-class voters were its ardent opponents. Reformers succeeded by writing the rules to win, disfranchising their opponents, and so creating electorates more middle class than the adult population as a whole.

Reform succeeded in the Progressive era less from the support of most voters than from the weakness of their opponents in the West, border states, and South. Crucial to opponents' weakness was suffrage restriction, which changed the composition of local electorates, not incidentally disfranchising

the strongest opponents of municipal reform. In the same places—in the South and West—the working classes lacked strong parties or political machines to defend them. That said, we think reformers succeeded by writing the rules so they could win.

Our account shows that two variables—the presence/absence of immigrants and turnout (participation) in elections—largely account for regional receptivity or antipathy to municipal reform. This account is consistent with historical narratives showing middle-class support for municipal reform and working-class and immigrant opposition to it. Where suffrage restriction was successful, electorates were likely more middle class (as well as more Anglo) than the population as a whole. Low-turnout cities were likely to adopt reform charters because the opposition—almost everywhere the organized working class—was weak at the polls.

This account has the virtue, in our view, that it explains regional variation without resorting to narratives about regional peculiarities and is independent of either ethos or “attitudinal or socioeconomic variables.” Like other authors who emphasize the importance of institutions, we recognize that preferences matter but insist that the rules of politics matter as well. Everywhere, the working classes opposed municipal reform. Where the rules of political life allowed them access to the polls and where there were political parties to defend their interests, the promoters of municipal reform were rebuffed. Where parties were absent and working-class voters few, municipal reformers were triumphant.

NOTES

1. The alliance of municipal reform and suffrage restriction did not end with the selection of reform charters in the Progressive era. Where reformers succeeded at designing local governments, they maintained regimes of much lower participation than the party politicians of the Northeast and Midwest (Bridges 1997a, chaps. 3, 6). Also, in response to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, urban leaders across the South changed institutional arrangements (where they did not already exist) to citywide elections, “black beater” systems (in which council members represented wards but were elected citywide), and aggressive annexation of suburbs (Davidson 1992, 21-34). Alas, although political scientists persisted in searching for evidence that social structure and governmental form were related, politicians and voters alike were fighting, quite sensibly, about the rules of local political life.

2. The estimate of a 3.3% response in percentage reform for a 10% change in turnout applies at the sample mean; for cities with a very high (or low) percentage of foreign-born residents, the response will be somewhat smaller.

3. The parameter estimate for the western region variable has a *p*-value of .13. The point estimate suggests that western cities were 18% more likely than northeastern cities to adopt reform government, controlling for turnout and foreign-born presence.

4. David (1972, 35-37) has constructed a careful measure of party competitiveness. A simple average of state scores by region for the period 1896-1930 shows that partisan competitiveness is much the same in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, but the South is significantly different. Had we possessed a comparable measure of organizational strength, we might have added party variables to our analysis. We spent some effort in historical investigations to construct such a measure, but we were not confident that our resulting measure would have been convincing.

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