

Observations on the Research Agenda

Roger B. Parks

An Appraisal of Metropolitan Government

Today, just as in the past, the virtues of metro government are mostly assumed rather than demonstrated. Metro has never been “sold” as a reform based in rigorous research. Scott Greer’s comments on this topic are revealing. As he pointed out years ago, the would-be reformers of St. Louis were eager to provide evidence of serious scale economies in local government services—the only problem was that they could find none.

None of the handful of metropolitan governments created post-World War II have been evaluated across the range of promised benefits. The few studies of metropolitan finance suggest that metro governments are more expensive than comparable areas that did not reform—though there is scant evidence on service quantity or quality changes. My own research in Indianapolis supports Dan Elazar’s insight that metro reforms consist principally of capture of the central city by its suburbs. Rather than allowing the poor and minority residents of Indianapolis to benefit from the resources of their suburban neighbors, the Unigov reform allowed suburban Republicans to gain control of the city in perpetuity, and to use its resources to benefit suburban interests. Central city residents were allowed to pay the bills.

If metropolitan governments really do offer the cornucopia of benefits articulated by their supporters, surely it would be pos-

sible by now to point to serious research demonstrating those benefits. The absence of such evidence is suggestive, but I certainly support Nelson’s call for more research—what scholar wouldn’t!

Functional Regionalism and Incremental Change

As Nelson notes well, lots of traditional scholarship excoriated special districts as undemocratic, fragmenting mechanisms—ones that stood in the way of true metro reform. Despite this negative “expert” rhetoric, citizens of metro regions across America and around the world continue to create special districts to address issues at a scale for which existing local governments are not well suited. This includes small-scale districts within large cities—special benefit districts, tax increment financing districts, neighborhood governments—as well as large-scale districts dealing with issues like air and watersheds, transport, even fiscal redistribution in at least one instance.

One advantage of special districts and other forms of functional regionalism is that local citizens create these as needed in light of local circumstances and history. Unlike the “one right way” reforms advocated by many public administration scholars, reforms created locally are more likely to be adopted and more likely to work reasonably well post-adoption.

Nelson is correct in his call for a greater understanding of the web of governmental,

not-for-profit, and private relationships in metro areas. Lester Saloman has explored this web in the social service arena, as has my colleague Bob Agranoff. Ron Oakerson and I documented the complexly-organized service structures of the St. Louis and Pittsburgh metro areas. Those who take the time to research such arrangements in the field find complex structures of local governance, not the fragmented/balkanized structures so often imagined by metro reform advocates. In most cases these complex structures work reasonably well in the absence of an authoritative overlay with broader powers.

Regional Councils

Part of what draws together the complex metropolitan organization are a series of regional councils of various types. In addition to, or instead of, formally organized councils of governments, most metropolitan areas have councils of municipalities and other classes of local governments. They also have associations of service delivery specialists and other public officials. These groups constitute local forums where issues of joint concern to multiple jurisdictions can be debated and local accommodations can be reached. While not usually designated regional councils in a formal sense, these functional and political groupings perform important integrative, coordinating functions. A Regional Council [capital R, capital C] may not be necessary to accomplish many regional tasks.

Special Concerns of Special Interests

Why do citizens oppose metropolitan reform? There are many reasons. They believe that large government is more costly and less effective. The empirical evidence relating size to cost supports their views.

They feel that large government is less accessible and less responsive to local interest. Some evidence and much rhetoric supports this view. They are convinced that the advocates of metropolitan government, especially those supporters from big business, have a political and/or economic agenda which is not fully revealed. Citizens are skeptical of the sentiment of *noblesse oblige* of the business community. They worry that the "good ole boy" network can more easily control one big government than a constellation of smaller ones. Nelson says he is hopeful that state legislatures will override democratic preferences to impose metro governments on their urban regions. I think this is quite unlikely in most states.

Conclusion

So where are we, where do we go forward? We need much more careful attention to the realities of metropolitan organization and governance than is found in most of our literature. The caricatures of fragmentation and gargantua serve no one well. Careful study of what works in particular metropolitan areas and why, plus what doesn't work and why not, could inform a serious effort to improve on local governance in those areas facing real problems.

In my own view, the most pressing need is a granting of greater governing authority to inhabitants of distressed urban neighborhoods, especially in our larger cities. In city after city, urban neighborhoods are organizing in an attempt to wrestle with local problems—problems where the efforts of large urban governments have so far failed. Those of us who wish to improve urban governance ought to be solidly behind such efforts. ■

Roger B. Parks is a professor, School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.