

Urban Regime Theory

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There is a general consensus among urban politics scholars that urban regime theory has been the dominant paradigm in studies of US urban governance since the 1980s. For many decades before this, urban scholars have identified the crux of city politics to be the relationship between public institutions and private interests (Judd 1988), and urban regimes became the theoretical embodiment of this observation. Urban regime theory places its focus on how governance in a city works, with an emphasis on the informality of arrangements that allow cities to function. As defined by Stone (1989, 6), an urban regime represents “the informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions.”

Thus, urban regime theory takes the view that local governance is a condition of mutual dependence. Cities, as sites of commerce and employment, obviously cannot subsist without the continued investment and practice of private sector industries. At the same time, private sector interests need public investment in policy areas that may contribute to their profitability. Whether this is a direct investment in infrastructure that makes trade more conducive (e.g., improved roads or traffic easing for moving goods) or a regulatory change such as zoning, the command to change policy must come from the public sector. This invites discussions into whether public officials act in direct response to private sector requests, but

the fact remains that public actors are the necessary decision-makers for such changes.

Although the theory and term evolved over the decades of the 1980s (e.g., Fainstein and Fainstein 1983; Elkin 1987), regime theory's central position in the field of urban politics was cemented by the publication of Clarence Stone's *Regime Politics* in 1989. Stone's study of Atlanta demonstrated the way in which long-standing political relationships between coalitions of private interests and local government produced governing outcomes in a large city. Stone's study covered the post-World War II decades in the city, a period in which federal government fiscal support of US cities was at an all-time high, and national government policy was also local development policy. Namely, urban renewal, which originated in the 1949 Housing Act, invited city governments to rebuild their central areas and invigorate their housing stock with federal grants. This prompted local governments to form housing/renewal agencies tasked with implementing urban renewal plans if funding was obtained. As one would expect, real estate and commercial groups in cities had direct interests in the future of downtowns and their surrounding areas, and such groups worked directly with public officials to prepare urban renewal proposals. In Atlanta, regime-building included a biracial coalition consisting of the city's business elite and middle-class African Americans, and focused on urban renewal-related issues such as housing and central city redevelopment. The urban regime maintained itself as the city transitioned to an African American majority in the 1970s, thus demonstrating longevity even as the governing coalition transformed. Here, Stone (1989) focuses on the regime's structure after the election of

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Atlanta's first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, and his successor, Andrew Young, Atlanta's second black mayor. The coalition in Stone's Atlanta case, then, served as an ideal case of urban regime-building, and set the standard for others studying power in US cities.

Like any strong theory, urban regime theory gains its strength in the ability to explain or apply to a high proportion of outcomes, and in its ability to hold validity across a number of cases. As urban renewal/slum clearance was a national program, most large and medium-sized US cities followed patterns similar to Atlanta in the sense that public officials such as mayors worked closely with private interests to secure federal funding for central city redevelopment. Thus, the foundations of the regime idea could be found in numerous cities, with obvious variations due to scale and local political culture. Stone recognizes this early in his book when he outlines two key components of the concept, the "who and how" of regimes – which interests and political actors make up the governing coalition, and how they reach decisions (1989, 6). The political actors constituting the "who" agree on an "identifying agenda," are a "relatively stable" group, and work to produce outcomes – in other words, the "how," or arrangements, "provide a capacity to act and bring resources to bear on the identifying agenda" (Stone 2001, 21). The basic components of the urban regime are fairly straightforward, then, and present in many cities.

It is the parsimony of regime theory that explains its rise and spread among urban scholars. The basic principles, and definition, are clearly present in most cities (US and global) – and Stone lays the groundwork for the more nuanced details of regimes in cities other than Atlanta by suggesting that the study of urban governance, guided through the lens of regimes, is to seek out the who and the how. Of course, as scholars sought the answers to these questions in various urban

settings, typologies of urban regimes began to emerge.

To a large extent, the urban regime idea grew out of a scholarly debate over who controls US cities, and, specifically, whether the process by which this occurs is democratic or oligarchical. Floyd Hunter's influential study of community power in an American city – Atlanta, as it turned out – suggested that a few interested and powerful individuals made all the decisions in "Regional City." Political scientists were not comfortable with this elite-driven decision-making in cities that were meant to be rooted in the tradition of American democracy (Bennett and Spirou 2006).

The process-based theory of pluralism was political science's answer, and one of the chief pluralist studies was carried out in the context of urban politics. Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961) studied decision-making in three policy areas: urban renewal, education, and political nominations. Dahl argued that sociologists were incorrect in thinking that an elite could dominate decision-making in a city, as his study had found that policy interests were quite fragmented among elites. While it was clear that powerful and interested coalitions emerged within each of the three policy areas, there was no one overarching set of interests or political actors dictating outcomes across the city. Dahl also moved the focus from the boardroom to the halls of government. In being a process-based theory, pluralism studied the decision-makers, and the decisions, themselves. One broader critique of this approach suggests that pluralists did not consider the reasons certain decisions are on the agenda and why other issues are left off, and that this is perhaps the most important consideration when discussing power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962).

Hunter and Dahl had set two clear paths for explaining power in US cities. Regime theory found some middle ground in this

debate, recognizing that there were a set of powerful private actors in Atlanta, but that in order to realize and maintain power they had to work through public channels. It also reconceived power through the framework of cooperation. Stone's (1989) discussion of "power to" as opposed to "power over" suggested that regimes were empowering informal arrangements and the capacity to act on agenda items; thus, power was reflected in the capacity to act or accomplish the goals on the local political agenda.

Urban regime theory moves beyond the pluralist theories, suggesting that the focus here was too government-centric, not taking into account external factors that clearly affect urban governance by the end of the twentieth century (Stone 1987, 12). While utilizing some of pluralism's methods and its focus on power over decision-making, regime theory incorporates a political economy approach to urban development, recognizing the significant relationship between state and market. Of course, the extent to which capital influences power in urban settings opened the door to another critique of process-based or political approaches to governance, namely that city governments' interests were solely related to creating opportunities for capital development. Prominent discussions of urban power in the late 1970s and 1980s took this view of urban politics.

Regime theory also provided alternatives to the arguments to these theoretical approaches. One of the theories focusing on unitary interests in cities is found in Paul Peterson's *City Limits* (1981); Peterson argued that economic determinism and the particulars of the US federal system could explain local decision-making outcomes without considering "politics" in a broader sense. In combination with the neo-Marxian growth coalition theories emerging from the field of sociology, Peterson's argument threatened to remove the political or governance element

from the local decision-making process. From the perspective of Peterson (1981), city governments have a unitary interest to pursue policies that will induce economic growth. Such policies might come at the cost of specific residents in the short term, but will benefit the long-term interests of all residents by improving economic conditions. Actions focused on other policy areas would benefit specific constituencies more than others (e.g., social policy), according to Peterson, and thus should be a secondary focus for city government.

While many scholars pushed back on this logic, Peterson's text contained further support for the idea that cities should pursue "development" policy over "redistributive policy." Cities' institutional design gives them relatively significant power regulating land use, and thus they can be most effective in policies fixed to land-use issues within their borders. Most development policies relate to land use, and so cities have it within their power to dictate development policy in ways they cannot dictate social policy due to federal and state governments' broader authority on issues in these policy arenas. Peterson suggests that, when possible, cities should create development authorities that can pursue growth without having to engage the usual streams of policy approval or public votes of approval.

City politics, in this view, is a relatively simple field. Cities should emphasize development and growth politics benefits all residents. This leaves little room for political debates and coalition-building regarding specific policy issues. The other factor here is that forces affecting political decision-making are exogenous – namely shifts in the broader economy that may influence the method for pursuing economic growth. This reinforces the view that local politics has relatively insignificant importance with regard to explaining urban development outcomes.

Regime theory viewed this approach as overly simplistic, and argued that local decision-makers indeed “matter.” In this light, then, urban regime theory advocates approaches that support political agency. Stone (1987, 3) writes that local actors may indeed “play by rules that they have not made”— federal policy, state policy, global financial decisions – but that within these rules they have options that will shape city outcomes to the extent that different cities have very different results depending on the capacity of local regimes. In relation to the idea that development will benefit all in a city, regime theory would suggest that deliberations of politics and governance among regime members determine whether or not this is the case, and that studying development through a regime approach would produce empirical findings to evaluate the claim (Stone 1987).

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s scholars used the Stone (1989) study as a guide as they thoroughly developed and applied urban regime theory. This was particularly noticeable in the identification of different regime types in different US cities. Stone (1993) played a critical role in setting up the discussion by developing a typology of regimes: maintenance regimes, development regimes, middle-class progressive regimes, and lower-class opportunity expansion regimes. By classifying these different types of regimes, Stone (1993, 22) makes it clear how regime theory can help to predict policy-making outcomes. “Policy choice, then, is a matter of regime building, of building together essential partners on a basis that enables them to meld together the resources commensurate with the governing responsibilities undertaken.” Stone’s typology also presented those using the regime approach with a structure for interpreting the specific dynamics of coalitions they were observing

in their case cities (for an extensive categorization of regime types by city, see de Socio 2007).

In addition to identifying regimes within Stone’s framework, scholars were further developing and applying the regime theory to coalition dynamics uncovered in a broad array of case studies. For example, Larry Bennett (1993) describes the black regime in Chicago under Mayor Harold Washington. In San Francisco, Richard DeLeon (1992) did not find the coalition to match with the urban regime as described by Stone and others, and so he put forth the idea of the “antiregime,” or “a transitional political order set up defensively to block” (p. 8) a return to a development regime in San Francisco. Other urban scholars looked at the specific institutional arrangements in cities that might produce variation in regime type, and relations between regime members. For instance, Bryan Jones and Lynn Bachelor (1993) looked at “solution sets” and the ways in which the types of businesses in a specific city will affect the type of regime that develops. With their development of the solution set idea, Jones and Bachelor (1993, 17) demonstrated the ways in which regimes utilize different organizational approaches depending upon the specific policy problems a city faces. Barbara Ferman’s (1996) study of Chicago and Pittsburgh developed the idea of institutional/political “arenas” (e.g., electoral or business arenas) to analyze regime activity. The regime type would be affected (or determined) by the arenas that were most critical to politics in a given city. Thus, much of the leading scholarship over the course of two decades that focused on urban governance and coalition politics was framed within the broader discussion of regime politics, or aimed at refining regime theory to make it more analytically rigorous.

In many ways, the regime idea’s strength, that it broadly appealed to, and was broadly

applied by, scholars, also became a weakness. The more it was used, the less valid or precise the concept became. Stone (1989; 1993) had a very specific arrangement in mind as he developed the urban regime theory, but others utilizing it were less careful. As a result, urban regime theory fell victim to concept stretching (Mossberger and Stoker 2001). The more it was applied in multiple settings, the less explanatory power it held. The parsimony of the theory and its apparent ability to explain governance in numerous US cities incited the hope that it might be the theory that could apply to all US local governance. This led scholars to apply the term regime to any set of actors working together, even when the specific coalition did not necessarily meet the characteristics laid out by Stone's Atlanta case. Or, as Mossberger and Stoker (2001, 815–816) state: in certain studies “all cities are assumed to be regimes” which led to wide misclassification of certain governing arrangements as regimes. For example, an urban regime is stable, and develops over a long period. In some cases, short-term arrangements on specific developments might be characterized as regimes.

Another instance of concept stretching relates to the comparative use of regime theory. Several scholars have demonstrated that a difference in context precludes the valid application of the theory. For example, Jonathan Davies (2003) found that the rush to find urban regimes in the UK had been misplaced. The more formal urban partnerships pioneered in the UK were not regimes, Davies argued, because regimes evolved from the mutual dependency of the private sector and public sector in the US. Local institutional design in the UK, where decision-making is much more centralized, meant that, when business interests were involved, it was mainly a symbolic role where authority and decision-making were clearly housed in the public realm (Davies

2003, 259). In theory development, of course, specifics have significance, and in cases where the terminology of regime theory was used with several adjustments or exceptions made, the theory itself was weakened.

Another element that weakened regime theory's explanatory power was the change that occurred in intergovernmental relations in the USA. Beginning with Salisbury's (1964) “new convergence of power” piece, which described mayors of large cities as managers of figurative federally funded building machines due to urban renewal policy's allocation of funds for physical development projects, city government had a natural reason to be working closely with local business interests such as real estate and commerce. In this view, federal policy produced regime politics, or, at the very least, contributed to its rise. As the federal government retreated from urban policy in the 1970s and 1980s, intergovernmental coalitions changed. State government reemerged as a critical player for local development, especially in relation to funding for large-scale development. As cities were rebuilding their central areas for the purposes of attracting tourists and entertainment, one strategy was to turn to state leaders for political support as well as funding – this often resulted in the governors' direct involvement in urban development decisions or coalitions (Burns 2003). In cities such as Baltimore, Houston, and Chicago, state-created special purpose authorities were lead financiers and managers of local developments. For example, the Maryland Stadium Authority has been a key player in Baltimore redevelopment, leading projects such as the Baltimore Convention Center, Oriole Park at Camden Yards, and M&T Bank Stadium (home field of the NFL Baltimore Ravens). Such authorities often retain ownership of development projects, securing a long-term stake in urban development and politics.

The high level of state government involvement changed the dynamics of local coalitions, which essentially become more formalized through the use of special purpose authorities. Regime theorists, however, initially viewed these changes through the lens of expanded local coalitions. Burns (2002; 2003) and Burns and Thomas (2004) speak of governors as members of urban regimes, for example. This demonstrates the potential for shifts in intergovernmental cooperation to contribute to concept stretching, for while governors and other state-level actors may become temporarily critical to local development and governing decisions on a case by case basis, they would not be long-term regime coalition partners, which is a key component of the regime concept.

Another way in which state entry into urban development affected the validity of regime theory relates to the formality of the arrangements mentioned above. When states create special purpose development authorities to administer and manage local development, they generally utilize a board of directors to manage decision-making at the development authority while leaving the appointment of board members to a mayor and governor. This may result in the appointment of individuals representing traditional regime membership, thus formalizing their role in the governing process (Smith 2010). While not necessarily a change to the interests or players involved in local development politics, this institutional arrangement, and the incorporation of state-level interests, certainly suggests that regime approaches may be in need of updating.

Finally, an ever more globalized economy weakened or removed many *local* business interests that had once constituted key players in urban regimes. This is not to say that private interests are any less influential or critical to local development policy today, only that the nature of private organizations'

structure has impacts on local governing coalitions. When management is transient, and companies have global headquarters, they are less interested in the specific future of any one city. A multinational bank has temporally limited interest in the city where it houses one arm of its global operations – a tax abatement relating to its location in that city may be useful for reducing short-term costs, but the global corporation has less interest in the long-term viability of a location than a local bank or local newspaper. Regime-era business was mainly local – the influential voice of the chamber of commerce in Stone's Atlanta, for example – and very interested in the capacity of local government to produce results in line with its interests. In the case of a policy issue such as local public education (as opposed to development), land-locked industries have a sustained interest in employable residents with high levels of skill for the city and region, whereas global industry has the capability to follow talent or select a different base for operations. This culminates in changes to local governing coalitions; for example, Elizabeth Strom (2008) has shown that nonprofit organizations, specifically focused on art, have become key players in local governing coalitions.

Beyond the specific changes leading to a gap between theory and governance on the ground, numerous scholars are now turning to the idea that regime theory explains one era of urban governance, but that new eras demand new approaches (e.g., Judd and Laslo 2013). The idea that regime analysis may be best suited to a specific era is a line of argument that Clarence Stone has recently adopted. In a 2015 article, Stone suggests that coalitions *resembling* regimes are still found in multiple cities but that “the one-time high-cohesion regimes held together around a redevelopment agenda (federally funded in large measure)” have been replaced by “more diffuse governing arrangements and

a less sharply defined agenda” (2015, 2). The decline of regime analysis, then, will be a soft landing assisted by its chief developer.

It is safe to argue that private interests and public institutions will continue to collaborate in urban policy-making in US cities for the foreseeable future. The nature of this interaction, however, has clearly changed in the time since regime theory emerged as the dominant paradigm of urban development theory. Most discussions of future theorizing less dependent upon regime theory have not been focused on *replacing* regime theory with a new paradigm. Instead, most of the focus has stayed on why regime theory has lost conceptual validity while holding back on what exactly comes next in terms of urban theorizing, while also placing the theory in a broader context of urban history and power.

Fittingly, it is Clarence Stone who has laid the clearest path forward, building on the critique that regime theory is era-dependent – in Stone’s (2015) words, it is an issue of “periodization.” To address this criticism, as well as the intergovernmental criticisms covered in the previous section, Stone (2015) has developed the idea of the “urban political order.” The UPO is viewed

not as a static arrangement but as a cluster of evolving relationships anchored in the city and extending into an intergovernmental dimension and reflecting an ongoing process of globalization. Like regime analysis, the concept of an urban political order retains the idea of a political whole and focuses on the way it holds together and how its tensions are manifested. As a concept, urban political order is intended to have room for cross-time comparisons as well as those across cities. (2015, 9)

Taking a UPO perspective, the Atlanta that helped to hone the regime idea falls under an order that Stone (2015) calls the “redevelopment period” which is characterized by several structural changes – the transition from rail to automobile transit, and the great

migration of African Americans to northern cities, and an influx of federal dollars into city government for the purposes of central area redevelopment – which in turn shape local governing coalitions in ways that produce Stone’s earlier-described regimes (2015, 10). Stone suggests that the redevelopment order ends by 1980, replaced by the postindustrial or global era, one in which the federal government factors much more minutely into urban policy-making, and the core of local business elites that constituted one leg of the urban regime has diluted due to global shifts in business.

American political development (APD) scholars have also provided an institutional route for future urban theorizing that incorporates regime approaches but places them in a broader context of political history. Stone and Whelan’s (2009) chapter in Richardson Dilworth’s (2009) edited collection focused on applying the more institutionally or state-driven field of APD to urban development. This piece clearly lays forth the commitment of Stone and colleagues to APD approaches using historical change, and particularly periods of significant change, or “intercurrence” (see Orren and Skowronek 2004) as frames for analyzing power dynamics in cities.

APD offers a polity-centered approach in which politics is thoroughly interwoven with the economic and social features of a complex body of arrangements for governing. In putting political change at center stage, APD suggests caution about pursuing parsimony at the cost of adequacy of explanation. (Stone and Whelan 2009, 99)

It is appropriate that the apparent next steps in theorizing discussed above retain the urban regime approach within a broader context of urban development and politics.

With regard to legacy, it is clear that regime scholars produced a widely accepted

middle ground in the structure/agency debate regarding urban power. Even when deterministic arguments are made, they seem to be couched in the idea that politics matters and that different cities, different leadership coalitions, will have varying levels of success responding to, or shaping, the structural forces within the global economy. Regime theory, and the many scholars who have used it as a conceptual framework for studying city politics, have produced a basis for understanding the numerous ways in which organizations, sectors, politicians, and residents must often work together to produce the capacity to address urban challenges. And while the urban politics field continues to develop, encompassing topics more diverse and widespread than central city redevelopment, studies of urban governance will long reference the urban regime as a central concept.

SEE ALSO: Community Development; Deindustrialization; Growth Machine Politics; Postindustrial Economy; Public-Private Partnership; Urban or Downtown Renaissance; Urban Economy; Urban Governance; Urban Policies; Urban Renewal; Urban Restructuring

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