Turbulence and Urban Innovation

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Background

How have cities innovated in the last two decades--a period of dramatic socio-economic and political change which social scientists have minimally incorporated into their theories? This period has seen some key social changes that demand adjustments in past assumptions and require new propositions to incorporate them. The turbulence of the last two decades is particularly critical in reshaping our analyses of how governments work. We have seen:

* the end of more than a century of government growth, manifest especially in cutbacks of grants from national governments to cities--U.S. government grants dropped by over half from 1977 to the early 1990s
* a breakdown of traditional distinctions between political parties and disattachment of voters from all parties--illustrated by a more than doubling of Independent voters, as high as 33 percent in some surveys
* a drop by half in voter turnout in elections from the 1960s to 1980s, but a doubling of membership in certain organized groups (notably ecology groups)
* taxpayer revolts, like Proposition 13 in California
* more educated, independent, skeptical and demanding citizens, dissatisfied with traditional service delivery modes
* new, talented leaders who develop creative forms of service delivery and distinctive general leadership patterns

These are just a few examples of the turbulence challenging standard operating procedures of city governments. Yet every change breeds resistance; the new often adds to, instead of replacing, the old. City councils and administrators add some of the new without abandoning the old, struggling to respond to new pressures in ways that seem *reasonable* and *feasible*.

Types of Answers to: How Innovate?

How then do cities innovate? This question can be answered two ways: First, practically, through synthesis of work by ourselves and others over the past decade, with examples of innovations that actually work in specific cities. The clearest summary of these points for the practical reader is in our concluding chapter 8 of *Urban Innovation*. Some of these are summarized at the end of this paper.

A second answer to how cities innovate takes a longer route. Based on a reassessment of theories of political leadership and government decision-making; a new interpretation is developed. Leadership is embedded in changing citizen preferences and organized group activities, and has contributed to creation of a New Political Culture. This culture defines new rules of the game. Components have been described by specialists in many subfields, but it is far more than the sum of its parts. The New Political Culture is a dramatic break from the past. It integrates many changes indicated above into a political program. These new policy goals and approaches to

decision-making stress more collegial management and citizen responsiveness. The New Political Culture has led to an Anti-Growth Machine. Many persons are skeptical that really fundamental changes are occurring, but the extent and nature of changes in city leadership and policy-making can be seen in an unusually rich and diverse set of sources:

* *a* sense *of specific leaders, cities, and policies* has been derived from case studies, often generated from consulting with individual cities and from an awards program we developed on Urban Innovation for city governments.
* *the national scope of major trends, and unusual* cases have been assessed through surveys of mayors, council members, and chief administrative officers in every U.S. city over 25,000 (1030 cities); similar surveys in most of Europe, and selected countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, as part of the Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation Project.
* *a baseline of variables on socio-economic changes* has been created through highly detailed data from unpublished U.S. Census tapes, merged with our survey data.
* *past results by others were compared to ours by* merging surveys such as those from the International City Management Association (very few other major urban surveys have been conducted since the 1970s).
* *historical perspective was added through* accessing past surveys of U.S. cities, especially the Permanent Community Sample of 63 cities monitored by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago from 1967 onward.

These combined sources provide far more extensive information than available to us or any others in past work on urban politics and local government. Rapid and continued progress in computer hardware and software has helped us to access, analyze, and present these massive data simply and rapidly. A calculation that in the 1960s took weeks of work by 20 assistants could be completed in a manner of minutes by the 1990s.

The Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation Project
Yet people, as ever, are the key, especially participants in the Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation Project, which began in 1982. Across the U.S. and around the world, we have conducted common surveys and case studies, identifying innovations, specifying where and why they work. These joint efforts have led to a substantially deeper understanding of these issues than was possible from past studies of local government. For the first time ever comparable data are available for national samples of cities in countries around the world. We can now identify specifics that past writers had to speculate about or not discuss, such as how much impact do political parties have in different countries, or how important are neighborhood or business groups in affecting local government policies? The FAUI teams include over 700 persons now active in more than 35 countries. We meet in various conferences, most recently the World Congress of the International Sociological Association, Montreal, July 1998, where some 133 persons participated in sessions with papers or roundtable discussions.

The international Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation surveys also included 33 policy strategies that many cities have used, like user fees or contracting out. A descriptive overview of the strategies is identified in chapter 8 entitled "Innovations that Work: A Menu of Strategies" of *Urban Innovation*. This paper outlines a policy-oriented introduction to specific innovations.

We do not present a single key *finding* or *solution* for urban problems. There isn't one. Our answers are more complex, just as the problems are more complex. Few local officials clearly advocate any single strategy or set of strategies; there is no widget that all cities should or can adopt. Instead, what emerges powerfully is that *cities differ*: in their problems and appropriate solutions, both inside and outside the U.S. but not randomly. Specifying how and why they differ in broad orientation and specific policies is a major focus of this book and related international work.

Local Officials are Key

We have learned from many local officials. They are our real heroes and heroines. They stand for elected office, and win or lose after investing enormous energy and time in return for modest tangible rewards--certainly as measured by money. In this period of dramatic transformation in political ideologies, we must refrain from filtering the attitudes and behavior of local officials through our own narrow political perspective. Studying political ideology does not give license to social scientists to promote their own ideology. Maintaining openness to major transformations is essential to understanding, even if the transformations contradict one's most cherished beliefs. Neither we nor anyone can be completely objective; we are all products of our surroundings. But given the central importance of changing ideologies, critical to extending our understanding is fleshing out alternative ideological perspectives, old and new, and linking them to specific types of citizens, organized groups, cities, and policy outputs.

A policy implication of this perspective is that some city officials find certain classes of strategies more *feasible*, that is, easier to adopt, than others. Feasibility is more than a choice by one person; it flows from the overall orientation of the city, from its political culture. Clarifying which strategies are more feasible, politically and administratively, and why, is a major concern. *Feasibility* for a participant becomes *adoption, diffusion*, or *implementation* for an analyst. While we build on several past theories in this area, most are too narrow since they stress only one or a few factors. They therefore hold only in a particular context, usually left undefined. This has impaired innovation theories for decades (cf. Clark 1968). Does the *market or entrepreneurial leadership* spur innovation, as certain theories hold? Only in selected *contexts*, for example cities that differ in their resources, key public participants, and rules of the game (or political culture). For instance, contracting out with private firms to reduce costs may not be politically feasible if unions are extremely powerful. The manager who is highly entrepreneurial and aggressive (as certain policy schools teach) will just get fired in cities where elected officials are jealous of staff. Specifying which strategies work in cities with strong unions, for example, and what works elsewhere, must be recognized as a critical part of the theory. The search for a theory providing contextually sharper answers to important policy questions leads us to propositions including contextual relations (e.g. contracting in cities with strong versus weak unions). This similarly leads us to focus on political and administrative cultures of different locales. Specific rules of the game and policy preferences (cultures) operate to constrain or facilitate particular policy strategies. Our international work is especially important in indicating what about U.S. cities is unique or shared with cities in other countries.

Sources:

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