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*Morning Glories: Municipal Reform in the Southwest*, by Amy  
**Bridges**

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## Tenacious Roots and Vines: Structural Reform in the Urban Southwest

Amy Bridges, Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, begins her excellent comparative study of municipal reform in the large cities of the Southwest with a quotation from New York City machine politician George Washington Plunkitt, who wrote off reformers as “‘morning glories’ who ‘looked lovely in the mornin’ and withered up in a short time, while the regular machines went on flourishin’ forever, like fine old oaks’” (p. 3). Bridges notes that just as Plunkitt’s analysis was limited by his consideration only of the fragile flowers of an especially vigorous vine, one that thrives in the Southwest by the way, standard descriptions of American urban patterns based on evidence from northeastern cities provide only a partial understanding of city politics in the United States.

Bridges is the first to compare what she refers to as the “rules of the game” in a variety of Southwestern cities. Placing her work in the context of institutional approaches yet breaking from a focus on administrative and/or legislative institutions, Bridges emphasizes electoral politics or “how the rules influence both the strategies and tactics of the players, and styles of governance” (14). Students of urban history will appreciate the clarity of an introductory chapter that provides not only an overview of the “new institutionalism” but also analyzes approaches to American political development that focus on the roles of region, race, political culture, and growth. These sections demonstrate that Bridges has moved past existing models to develop a complex, multicausal explanation for the persistence of structural reform in the Southwest. On region, historians will almost certainly

agree that “Quite simply, ‘when’ matters” (19). Bridges uses history not to expand the number of cases or amount of data available but to demonstrate that southwestern cities developed differently in large part because they developed later. On race, she dismisses interpretations that present civil rights protests and their attendant lawsuits as evidence of a new assertiveness in communities of color and asserts that resistance and repression have been ongoing (and historical) processes throughout the Southwest. According to Bridges, from the beginning, “Every city policy—hiring of municipal employees, planning and annexation, housing, utilities, and education—reinforced racial division and hierarchy” (p. 20).

Chapters 2-4 provide case studies of San Diego, Albuquerque, Phoenix, and Houston, based on archival sources (mostly newspapers and unpublished papers) and secondary works. These chapters, outlining common challenges to local growth elites, campaigns to win reform charters, and obstacles that convinced reformers to abandon commissions in favor of council-manager plans, debunk the popular tendency in the Southwest to see one’s own city’s history as somehow unique. Bridges provides substantial evidence that leaders across the region shared goals, approaches, attitudes, and prejudices. For example, San Diego’s Edgar Luce claimed that municipal reform “left the (Republican) machine helpless and without its old weapons with which to ‘lineup’ its forces. The new system therefore is a great boon to independent good government politics” (p. 70). Houston mayor Ben Campbell expressed similar satisfaction with nonpartisan city government’s ability to manage dissent and promote

“concert of action, uniformity of opinion, solid, strong, undivided effort, for the upbuilding of the whole city” (p. 70).

Chapters 5-8 expand the study to add Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, and San Jose. To facilitate comparison, Bridges provides tabular data on all seven cities throughout the work. Southwestern municipal reformers achieved almost all of their goals: nonpartisan, at-large elections, city managers, a professional civil service, low tax rates, and few social service responsibilities. Across the region, they limited popular participation in municipal elections and targeted city services to the affluent white voters who ensured their re-election. Reform leaders, mostly businessmen, were extremely popular with an extraordinarily narrow electorate. Business leaders’ control over the local media, segregated neighborhoods, low tax rates, and the efficient provision of city services in sections where residents were able and likely to vote gave the impression of widespread prosperity and reinforced reformers’ inflated rhetoric. While much of the voting data is unavailable, tables showing turnout in municipal elections in the seven southwestern cities compared to that in Chicago, New York, and New Haven between 1920 and 1989 demonstrate reformers’ success in restricting the electorate.

Southwestern cities exhibited three stages in the development of big-city reform: the first reform charter (usually a commission plan), the adoption of the city manager form, and the switch to district city council elections, which generally ended the reform era. Bridges notes that these stages, so crucial to municipal politics, did not occur at the same time across the region and cannot be attached to specific decades or national benchmarks. Unlike the well-funded, cohesive campaigns that ushered in municipal reform, the lawsuits, “gentlemen’s agreements,” and referenda that brought district elections in the 1970s were generated by uneasy coalitions of racial and ethnic minority communities, environmentalists, slow growth advocates, and populists. Bridges asserts that “this does not mean...that the actors who have made up the growth machine are gone, but rather that proponents of growth are challenged by demands for environmental caution and social equity as they are in cities elsewhere” (p. 200). Even so, stable coalitions have not yet appeared. Investigations in eleven cities have shown an absence of predictable alliances or regular voting patterns among councils constituted since district elections. Even without new governing coalitions, however, district elections have significantly changed city government. Instead of working for the rhetorically inclusive

and historically exclusive “city as a whole,” councils now promote equity among districts, with members deferring to district representatives on issues affecting particular parts of town. Policy making is often decentralized. In many cities, money is allocated to districts, and representatives make the spending decisions.

Bridges points to San Antonio as a rare example of broader policy changes. With a politically-organized Latino majority and a divided business community, Latino leaders have redirected growth policies from new development on the city’s wealthy north side to redevelopment downtown and on the older south side. Smaller communities of color lacking either umbrella organizations or potential allies lead Bridges to doubt that San Antonio’s relative success will be duplicated across the region, however.

Still, municipal government in the big cities of the Southwest is now more like that in the rest of the country. Despite the persistence of city managers, nonpartisanship, and professionalism in public agencies and departments, the rules have changed to ensure that a greater variety of players come to the table. Contemporary city council members debate, negotiate, and bargain explicitly for specific constituencies. Working for the “city as a whole” rings nostalgic to some who miss the comfort of a manufactured consensus, but it’s no longer the *modus operandi* in southwestern city halls.

Bridges’ work is especially valuable for what it tells us of southwestern patterns and how regional forms modify growth-centered approaches to city politics. Especially significant here is the relative absence of municipal unions in the Southwest and the subsequent dependency of public bureaucracies (except in the case of autonomous development and port authorities). The prominent roles of southwestern developers with interests in far-flung neighborhoods often led to clashes with downtown interests and limited urban renewal. Uncertainty about the local economy seems to have boosted support for growth strategies among urban southwestern voters although such policies failed to serve many ordinary citizens. According to Bridges, “some thrived as southwestern cities expanded, for many others...rising tides provided only wet feet” (p. 216).

Finally, Bridges asks us to reconsider geographical applications of terms like “conservative” and “liberal” in light of political arrangements that severely restricted the southwestern electorate. Was the urban population of the Southwest really substantially more conservative than city dwellers in the Northeast? Differences in the

ways city boundaries were drawn, exclusionary voting policies, patterns of non-participation, etc. require that we “problematize these assumptions about political culture” (p. 217). In an appendix on her choice of cities, Bridges anticipates this reader’s desire for a comparison of the reform cities studied here and those that bucked the regional trend. El Paso, Tucson, Houston (which adopted, then quickly rejected a reform government), Los Angeles, and San Francisco are notable enough for their

size to make an analysis of regional patterns that omits them fascinatingly muddy. An impossible task in a single monograph, perhaps Professor Bridges will take this on as her next project.

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