



FROM THE EDITORS: Cities and Urban Politics

by Eugene Finkel, Adria Lawrence, and Andrew Mertha



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The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the 11-million-person city of Wuhan, China, has had a particularly severe impact on cities across the globe to date. At this writing, New York City, Detroit, New Orleans and Boston are among the hardest hit in the United States, and the number of cases is increasing in cities and towns in other parts of the world. The combination of poverty and pollution in densely-settled areas provides a particularly acute set of challenges. This current global crisis underscores an urgent need to pay attention to how the environments in which we live affect our politics. How do politics vary from city to town to village? How do urban and rural spaces affect public attitude and behaviors? How does space configure the kinds of public programs that can or should be implemented? How does it shape contentious politics? Is there a kind of politics that is specifically urban? How do urban politics differ in developing countries?

The crisis we face today makes the study of urban settings more critical than ever before. When we set out to devote the current issue of the newsletter to this topic, the pandemic had not yet begun, but there were still two pressing reasons to reflect on cities and urban politics. First, there has been a growing sense of the

substantive importance of understanding cities in the 21st century. Cities, as the authors in this issue note, have grown rapidly over the last half century, with urbanization leading to the concentration of population in urban centers in many countries. This concentration has consequences not only for issues such as resource use and allocation, but also for the political context. Scholars and analysts have noted that an increase in political polarization may reflect a growing divide between rural and urban populations, with space affecting the ways in which people understand their interests. Political ideology appears to differ from city to suburb to small town. The spaces in which we live increasingly appears to configure political demands, identities, behaviors and policies.

The second reason we chose to highlight this area of research is because urban politics is experiencing a bit of a renaissance in the discipline. Urban politics was, in decades past, relegated to a small corner of American politics, but with the growth of urban centers and the particular challenges and promises of that growth, scholars in comparative politics have undertaken new research on cities and space that assesses substantive arguments using cases from all over the world.





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In this issue, we turn to a group of scholars who are doing cutting-edge research on political processes that unfold in urban spaces. Our contributors use a diverse set of qualitative and quantitative research techniques to discuss a wide range of well-established and emerging topics in the study of urban spaces and urban politics: housing, protests and social movements, crime, informal economy, environment, political behavior and attitudes.

Several contributions address housing politics, a paramount issue in any urban space. Maureen M. Donaghy focuses on the provision of public benefits by municipal authorities. Public benefits provided by national level governments are at the center of social science research and political debates, but benefits provided by local governments are no less important for the survival and wellbeing of millions of urban residents across the globe. Zooming in on the provision of affordable housing and comparing Atlanta, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Washington, Donaghy highlights the importance of social movements and grassroots organizations for our understanding of public benefits offered by cities. Yue Zhang also approaches urban housing policies from a comparative perspective. Focusing on urban governance issues in China, India, and Brazil she provides a typology of urban governance regimes – integrated, pro-growth, contested, and clientistic. Tanu Kumar studies the impact of homeownership on political behavior and attitudes in developing countries. The contribution utilizes a natural experiment in Mumbai, India, where citizens were assigned subsidized homes through a lottery. Kumar finds that homeownership increased the lottery winners' interest and participation in communal and political affairs.

Governance of mega-cities is a key issue of 21st century politics. Focusing on the case study of

Nanjing, Kyle A. Jaros analyzes the changes to the district structure of Chinese urban centers. Such changes, the article shows, help scholars to better understand the internal politics of China's cities. Jaros also demonstrates how the authoritarian and hierarchal nature of China's political system affects urban governance. Climate change, pollution, and other environmental issues also pose governance challenges to urban spaces. Yet comparative politics scholars, notes Veronica Herrera, largely neglect city-level environmental issues and politics. Studying environmental politics in urban settings, the article shows, can substantially improve our understanding of not only this crucial policy area, but also of topics such as collective action, mobilization, regulation and elections. Eduardo Moncada centers on crime and criminal violence, another important political and governance challenge confronting cities in the developing world. Moncada relies on extensive fieldwork in Medellín, Colombia to analyze how citizens resist victimization by criminal groups. The article shows how pre-existing institutions and capture of police forces by criminal actors affect the strategies of resistance to criminal violence.

Contentious politics and protests are a major focus of urban politics scholarship. Jeffrey W. Paller studies protest mobilization in Africa and offers an analytical framework that sees urbanization as "a contentious political process where population growth leads to competing and often conflicting claims on a city." Perceptions of urban citizenship and claims to urban space, Paller argues, help us to better understand mobilization processes in the Global South. Contributions by Tomila Lankina and Regina Smyth focus on urban protests in Russia and post-communist states. Lankina argues

for the incorporation of historical legacies into urban politics research. The past, she shows, matters for understanding present-day protest and non-protest in post-communist states. Scholars of urban mobilization ignore history at their peril while closer attention to legacies of the past can substantially improve our understanding of contemporary contentious politics. Smyth analyzes small-scale, non-political urban activism in Russia. Whereas most research on contentious politics and mobilization in post-communist states centers on large scale political protests and revolutions, Smyth demonstrates how and under which conditions non-political mobilization targeting local level authorities might allow for subsequent politically oriented collective action.

Technological innovations and changes affect politics not only at the national but also at the local levels. As Eleonora Pasotti shows, one effect of such innovations was the growing importance of branding in urban politics. Instead of relying on traditional political divisions, now both city governments and protesters rely on branding to promote or fight against urban development and growth policies.

Understanding individuals in various urban contexts is another important and growing research area. Chagai Weiss discusses the role of residential segregation in shaping intergroup relations. More specifically, he reviews the existing scholarship on how, why, and under what conditions segregation affects intergroup relations. According to Weiss, unpacking the black

box of contact in urban spaces can substantially improve our understanding of intergroup relations in urban settings. Hakeem Bishi and Shelby Grossman discuss the methodological issues of conducting research on participants in informal urban economies in the Global South. By drawing on their experience surveying informal market traders in Nigeria and Benin they discuss the limitations of the traditional sampling strategies and offer two new approaches: “full census” and “grid + partial census,” which help to better analyze political attitudes and informal economies in the developing world. Finally, whereas most urban politics scholars focus on large cities, Jennifer Fitzgerald studies how citizens think about, relate to, and experience their local communities in the small towns and villages of France. Focusing on such communities, Fitzgerald argues, allows scholars to better understand the “locally embedded individual,” namely the political implications of the ways individuals relate to their communities and processes and conditions which shape these individuals’ political beliefs and behavior.

These articles precede this Newsletter’s special feature. Neither scholars of comparative politics nor the broader public can avoid the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals and societies. The special feature of this Newsletter issue is a collection of short Q&As with experts on topics ranging from media to military medicine discussing the impact of the pandemic on the issues they study. ●

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