Gender and Regime Politics in U.S. Cities

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The scholarship on urban politics often focuses on the political economy provided by regimes, or long-term coalitions between local politicians and private actors like the business community. Notably absent from the regime scholarship is any substantial investigation of the role that urban regimes play in the promotion of the interests of women living in urban areas. A comparison of the priorities of urban regimes with the interests of women in politics suggests substantial conflicts. The implications for women serving in urban governance are explored, as are the consequences for urban politics, women in politics, and democracy.

Introduction:

The field of urban politics has long ignored the consequences of severe gender imbalances in city politics. Not only are women only 17% of large city mayors, but the structure and nature of urban power produces circumstances where the interests of women are shunted aside for the promotion of the interests of the dominant regime. The research presented here examines the place for female leaders within urban regimes, connecting ideas of gender politics to urban politics, with a focus on how the priorities of urban regimes and the interests of women in politics conflict.

Regime analysis focuses on a relationship between political and private actors, with a fundamental role for businesses in urban governance (Stone 1989). The scholarship on urban regimes suggests a consistent and systematic bias against those seeking outcomes that conflict with the goals of the regime (Stone 1980; Trounstine 2006). At the same time, the scholarship on women in politics suggests women (both residents of cities and urban leaders) will be less likely to support business interests and economic development and more interested in social policy (Burns and Schumaker 1987; Schumaker and Burns 1988; Sapiro 1983). The conflict between the policy goals of regimes and the priorities of women in politics suggests the desires of the dominant power structure may subjugate the policy preferences of women.

In intertwining women and politics theory with regime politics theory, I propose specific outcomes from the incorporation of women into municipal governance in places with dominant regimes. First, the female leaders may be atypical of female leaders in general and will confirm to regime values. Second, female leaders might hold policy preferences that are consistent with women in office generally, but the regime will resist their policy preferences when they attempt to change policies. A third possibility is that female leaders may be effective in producing
change, but in a limited manner and only when they use an approach to policy change that is unthreatening to the regime.

Urban Regimes:

Regime theory, a dominant theory of urban governance, posits the limitations on city governments by fiscal constraints produce an incentive for urban governments to form coalitions with nongovernmental actors (Stone 1989; Elkin 1987). Regimes have several components, including informal but stable relationships; bridging political administrations; serving as a connection between the “popular control of government and the private control of economic resources”; and a consensus of goals (Mossberger and Stoker 2001, 813). An agreement on goals and the problems in the city is particularly important (Burns and Thomas 2006; Mossberger and Stoker 2001); this is also seen holding power to, not power over (Rast 2006). Another key element of regime politics is the involvement of the business community in successful regimes; although the private partners in regimes can take many forms, “business and the resources they control are too important for the enterprises to be left out completely” (Stone 1989, 7). Business involvement is so important that “the absence of business participation in governing decisions is likely to compromise a city’s governing arrangements significantly” (Rast 2006, 85). The scholarship on urban regimes indicates the importance of both the existence of these informal coalitions and the prominence of businesses in the coalition.

Several types of regimes exist, including growth or developmental, maintenance, progressive, and opportunity expansion regimes (Stone 1993). The dominant form of urban regimes is a developmental regime, where the coalition can tap into resources provided by private actors to pursue development policies. The dominance of the developmental regimes is consistent with Peterson’s view of urban governance as development driven (1981). As
businesses, particularly corporate business interests, hold the majority of resources necessary for development, they are the natural private partners in these regimes.\(^1\)

Cities are able to operate without a regime in place, but the consequences can be severe. In examining the lack of a regime in New Orleans, Burns and Thomas find a nonregime “prevents stakeholders from either reaching shared understandings of policy problems and solutions, or reorganizing and forming a larger, more systematic community agenda” (2006, 519). Similarly, regimes that are resistant to business interests may suffer if they “alienate business elite and lead them to withdraw their resources and coordinative capital from the public sector” (DeLeon 1992, 557). In the fiscally constrained world of urban politics, a strong relationship between urban governance and private enterprise seems to be necessary for growth at the urban level.

**Gender and Politics**

Considerable research has examined the relationship between gender and political behavior, with a particular focus on the effect of gender on political attitudes (Carroll 2006; Conover 1988; Studlar et al. 1998) and on the behavior of political representatives (Dolan and Ford 1995; Thomas 1991, 1992, 1997; Thomas and Welch 1991; Carroll 1984; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Swers 2002). In the general population, women (compared to men) support compassion policies more and military or free market issues less (Andersen 1999; Carroll 1988; Gidengil 1995; Gilens 1988; Renfrew 1994; Rossi 1983; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986). At the local level, these differences in policy preferences would translate into differences in support for policies that relate to welfare, domestic violence, and policing.

\(^1\) Even in a progressive or opportunity expansion regime, the participation of business is a key component of the formation and maintenance of the regime (Stone 1993).
Women in public office are more likely to express attitudes that are pro-feminist, favor social and welfare politics, and support of women’s policies. Female leaders consider bills dealing with women, children, welfare, and education as more important (Welch and Thomas 1991), are more liberal, and are more likely to support education, welfare, and health policies (Swers 2002). If women in local office mirror the preferences of women in the general population and the behavior of women in office at the state and federal level, these women should support policies that relate to redistribution and compassion and may oppose economic development and business support policies.

**Gender and Urban Regimes:**

What is the place for gender in regime theory? As the values of women in politics and the priorities of developmental regimes seem to be in conflict, three possibilities arise as to what might be expected when women win elected office in cities with existing regimes: 1) female leaders will not express values consistent with the scholarship on women in politics; 2) they will express values consistent with the scholarship on women in politics, but will be ineffective in initiating change; 3) they will behave in a manner similar to women in other levels office, and will find ways to promote their policy priorities that do not conflict with the dominant regime.

When examining the connection between women and politics and regime theory, the first possible outcome for the integration of women in urban public office is that women selected for office that will not pose a challenge to the existing regime. If regimes co-opt female leaders at the urban level, women in urban public office should display no significantly different attitudes, particularly about development policies and the place of business in the city, than their male counterparts. Much of the scholarship finds little commonality between the behavior of women

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2I leave detailed discussions of the patriarchy of urban politics to others (Appleton 1995; Clarke et al. 1995; Hayden 1980) and focus on the application of traditional ideas of women in politics to the urban arena.
in urban office and those serving at higher levels of office. Studies of women in local office have found few differences between male and female leaders and have failed to conclude that female elected officials held women’s issues as a priority, when compared to male elected officials’ priorities (Flammang 1985; Mezey 1978, 1980; Beck 2001; Donahue 1997, 1999; Merritt 1980; Antolini 1984; Bers 1978). More recently, Weikart et al (2007), identified very few attitudinal differences between male and female leaders in city governments in the United States. For all city leaders, regardless of their gender, “cite taxes and development as the most important issues in the community” (Beck 1995, 123).³ These studies suggest that women entering into local office are not fundamentally different in their attitudes from their male counterparts.

Another possibility is that women in city leadership will express values consistent with the scholarship on women in politics, but will be ineffective in initiating change. Research suggests women hold alternate policy positions about the priorities of urban government. When it comes to local issues, women are more concerned with social policies (like welfare and crime) and less concerned with economics (such as development) (Sapiro 1983; Schumaker and Burns 1988; Burns and Schumaker 1987). Schumaker and Burns (1987; 1988) found that female residents, political activists and elites were more supportive of social and welfare policies and less supportive of traditional economic development activities. Similarly, Boles (2001) found that female officials were more committed to women’s issues than their male counterparts in Milwaukee, WI.

Not only are the traditional interests of women in public office in conflict with the general interests of most development regimes, but women serving in public office are less likely to overlap with development regimes in their background, as they are less likely to be lawyers

³ Many of these studies indicate that the lack of traditional “women’s issues” at the local level could be the primary driver behind the lack of gender differences.
and businessmen, both traditional members of development regimes (Fox and Lawless 2004; Darcy et al. 1987; Deckman 2007; Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2010). The distance between female leaders and business concerns is also consistent with a history of identifying women with the home and issues of the home, while men are connected with issues of the public sector (Saegert 1981; Appleton 1995). As such, women in local office may be likely to hold policy preferences that are in contradiction to regime goals and are less likely to have connections to a development regime.

Scholars investigating the experiences of women in local office have found evidence that the existing power structure subjugates women’s preferences. Beck finds “Women who assume office in municipal councils find norms are firmly entrenched and local agendas are mostly fixed. Budgets are presented to them, zoning laws are in place, and priorities are already established” (1995, 133) and Burns and Schumaker (1987) find that the local policy process is more likely to represent the interests of men, even when female leaders are present.

Regimes may be able to limit the power of women to accomplish policy change in a number of ways. Research has shown dominant regimes are able to establish control of the political system, focusing on “core supporters and powerful interests at the expense of the large community” (Trounstine 2006, 879). The dominant regime might stymie the ability of female leaders to enact change in multiple ways, including through immobilization (Stone 1980; Jezierski 1997), resource control (Trounstine 2006), and agenda and problem definition (Dowding 2001; Logan and Molotch 1987). Each of these techniques of power control has the potential to limit the ability of women to pursue their policy preferences. For example, Stone (1980) finds that immobilization strategies are used strategically by those in power when “some group presses a demand that runs counter to ingrained system biases…” (987). Women, thus,
may have different policy priorities, but the power of the existing regime restricts their ability to translate policy priorities to policy outcomes.

A final option is that women will express policy preferences that are consistent with women in the general population and women serving in other offices, and will accomplish policy change in ways that do not threaten the dominant regime (Smith 2010; Holman 2010). Women may accomplish their policy goals by creating issue-based coalitions (Burns and Thomas 2006) or by seeking the funds to provide a particular policy without upsetting the existing structure of resource allocation (Welch 1979; Smith 2010). However, issue based coalitions, “do not possess the resources that allow them to serve as permanent leaders of the city” (Burns and Thomas 2006, 519) and outside resources are limited in availability and require substantial dedication of time and energy. These confines suggest that women may be able to pursue their policy goals in a limited fashion, but will struggle to incorporate their goals fully into the dominant paradigm.

An empirical examination of each of these outcomes might reveal specific patterns. For example, women with attitudes inconsistent with women in politics generally would not demonstrate significantly different policy priorities. When an existing regime stymied women, the female leaders would reveal alternate policy preferences, but their presence would not affect policy outcomes. Women in the final category would display different policy preferences and would be able to affect small changes, but these changes would be limited in time, effect, or city support.

Conclusions

I have explored the intersections between ideas of women and politics and urban regimes. In mingling these fields, I posit that the power of regimes will prevent women in local government from effectively representing the interests of women in their communities. Women
in local government may be atypical of women in politics generally, typical of women in politics but ineffective, or typical of women in politics and effective, if non-threatening to the existing power structures. Women living in urban American often have distinct policy preferences from men, but the governance and power structures of urban regimes prevent incorporation of their views into the body politic. The difficulty for the integration of women’s interests into urban politics has several consequences. First, the lack of representation of women’s policy preferences poses a serious and long-lasting challenge to the fundamental idea of representative democracy; not only are women underrepresented in urban government, but when women serve in local office, they may not represent women’s interests or are unable to achieve substantial transformations of public policy. Second, the resistance of regimes to female representation also suggests consequences for women in local government serving as a political pipeline, where “women’s ranks in national and state offices will grow only when they make substantial gains at the local level” (Deckman 2007, 541). If women attracted to public service at the local level are fundamentally different from women attracted to other levels of office, the pipeline argument does not hold. In addition, if women at the local level are similar to women at higher levels of office, but are frustrated by their limited ability to accomplish change, they may be less likely to pursue higher levels of office. Finally, the hurdles presented here suggest women in the urban setting may be more successful in pursuing their policy interests through less formal organization, such as neighborhood groups. Overall, examining the experiences of women in local government through the lens of regime politics suggests a frustrating experience, both for the women in office, and the women in urban communities seeking representation.
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