

# Unwinding Privatization: (Re)municipalism and the Public Interest

University of Illinois at Chicago  
Interdisciplinary Online Conference  
December 10, 2021



The purpose of the conference is to examine responses to failures of privatization in cities, especially in the United States and Europe, and what to make of those responses. Since the 1970s municipalities have sold public assets such as water, electricity, gas, waste systems, and transport, to private companies or else transferred the management or delivery of city services to private actors. The results have been at best mixed. Of late, municipalities have been cancelling contracts, letting them expire or repurchasing the resource systems, sometimes as mandated by public referendums. On other occasions, private firms proved either unwilling to bid for a contract or canceled contracts early. This state of affairs has been variously characterized as “re-municipalization,” “new municipalism,” “in-sourcing,” “de-privatization,” and “reverse privatization.”

The conference examines: Which actors, institutions, and forms of finance, enable cities to take ownership of an asset or service previously outsourced or privatized? How sustainable are these controversial activities and what are their wider consequences? What explanations best account for these policy directions? What outcomes are missed by posing a private-public divide? What are the levels of power in the political system that facilitate the local “capacity to act”? What do (re)municipalizations portend for the future?

***The event is free, but registration is required to attend. Register at [go.uic.edu/MuniConference](https://go.uic.edu/MuniConference)***

Organized by Alba Alexander (UIC, Political Science), Larry Bennett (DePaul University, Political Science), Evan McKenzie (UIC, Political Science) and Michael Pagano (UIC, Public Administration).

Cosponsored by UIC Department of Political Science, Great Cities Institute, Institute for the Humanities, and College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs.

*Welcoming Remarks.* **Evan McKenzie**, University of Illinois at Chicago

**8:55-9:00 AM CST**

**Panel One. Origins of Municipalism: Historical and Conceptual Lessons**

**9:00-10:25 AM CST**

Chair. **Alba Alexander**, University of Illinois at Chicago

**Gail Radford**, State University of New York at Buffalo

*The Myth of American Hostility to Public Enterprise*

**Marco Rosaire Rossi**, University of Illinois at Chicago

*The Failure of the “Failure of Regulation”*

**Richardson Dilworth**, Drexel University

*Suburbanization, (Re)municipalization, and the Right to Water*

**David McDonald**, Queens University, CA

*Back to the Future? Pendulum Swings and the Lessons of History for Remunicipalization*

**Panel Two. Capacity to Act: Legacy and Impact of Privatization in Cities**

**10:30-11:55 AM CST**

Chair. **Evan McKenzie**, University of Illinois at Chicago

**Gregory Pierce**, University of California, Los Angeles

*Beyond the Strategic Retreat? Explaining Urban Water Privatization’s Shallow Expansion*

**Martha Kaplan**, Vassar College

*Radically Municipal Water: Decolonizing the City in Singapore*

**Heather Whiteside**, University of Waterloo

*Canadian Public Land Sales and UK PFI Handback: Contradictions and Opportunities*

**Todd Swanstrom**, University of Missouri, St. Louis

*Suburbanization as Privatization: The Future of the Public City*

**Keynote Speaker. The Honorable Dennis Kucinich**

**12:00-12:45 PM CST**

Moderator. **Michael Pagano**, University of Illinois at Chicago

**Panel Three. De-Privatization in Cities: Resistance and Adaptation**

**1:00-2:25 PM CST**

Chair. **Larry Bennett**, DePaul University

**Andrew Cumbers**, University of Glasgow

*Remunicipalisation, Neoliberalism and the Return of the State*

**Timothy Moss**, Humboldt University

*The Many Faces of Municipalisation across Berlin’s Turbulent History*

**Emanuele Lobina**, Public Services International Research Unit, University of Greenwich

*Remunicipalisation versus the Zombie: A Taxonomy of Policy Containment Strategies*

**Germà Bel**, University of Barcelona

*Remunicipalisation: Are we Heading to a New “Progressive Era”?*

**Panel Four. Toward (Re)municipalism? The Future of Urban Public Services**

**2:30-3:55 PM CST**

Chair. **Jefferey Sellers**, University of Southern California

**Mildred Warner**, Cornell University

*Pragmatic Municipalism: Understanding Trends in Local Government Service Delivery*

**Nelson Lichtenstein**, University of California, Santa Barbara

*Sectoral Bargaining on the State and Municipal Levels: Revisiting a Progressive Idea*

**Rachel Havrelock**, University of Illinois at Chicago

*The Price of Water, Climate Change, and (Re)municipalizing Utilities*

**Dennis Judd**, University of Illinois at Chicago

*The American Municipality and the Eclipse of Local Democratic Governance*

*Closing Remarks.* **Larry Bennett**, DePaul University

## SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

**Alba Alexander.** Clinical Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Illinois at Chicago. Her most recent publication is (co-edited with Dennis Judd and Evan McKenzie) *Private Metropolis: The Eclipse of Local Democratic Governance* (2021).

**Germà Bel.** Professor of Economics, University of Barcelona. Editor of *Local Government Studies*. Director of the Observatory of Analysis and Evaluation of Public Policies at the University of Barcelona. His widely published research focuses on public sector reform. Member of the Spanish Parliament 2000-2004 and member of the Catalan Parliament 2015-2017.

**Larry Bennett.** Professor Emeritus of Political Science, DePaul University. His books include *The Third City: Chicago and American Urbanism* (2015) and the co-edited *Neoliberal Chicago* (2016).

**Andrew Cumbers.** Professor of Political Economy, University of Glasgow. Editor in Chief, *Urban Studies*. He holds a European Research Council Advanced Grant on “Global Remunicipalisation and the Post-Neoliberal Turn” and is the author of *Reclaiming Public Ownership: Making Space for Economic Democracy* (2012).

**Richardson Dilworth.** Professor and Department Head of Political Science Drexel University. His latest publication (co-edited with Timothy Weaver) is *How Ideas Shape Urban Development* (2020).

**Rachel Havrelock.** Professor of English, University of Illinois at Chicago. She directs the UIC Freshwater Lab concerned with the Great Lakes and environmental justice. She is the author of *The River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line* (2011).

**Dennis Judd.** Professor Emeritus of Political Science, University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the author or editor of numerous books including (with Costa Spirou) *Building the City of Spectacle* (2016) and *Private Metropolis* (2021).

**Martha Kaplan.** Professor of Anthropology, Vassar College. She has published widely on anti-colonial ritual politics and on nation and decolonization. Her book *Water Cultures: Fiji, New York, and Singapore* is under contract with Duke University Press.

**Dennis Kucinich.** Mayor of Cleveland 1977-1979 and member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Ohio 1997-2013. He is author of *Division of Power and Light* (2021).

**Nelson Lichtenstein.** Distinguished Professor of History, University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author or editor of sixteen books. His most recent book (coedited with Gary Gerstle and Alice O'Connor) is *Beyond the New Deal Order* (2019).

**Emanuele Lobina.** Associate Professor, Public Services International Research Unit, University of Greenwich. He has researched the remunicipalisation of water services in the global North and South for more than twenty years. He is the co-editor (with Satoko Kishimoto and Olivier Petitjean) of *Our Public Water Future: The Global Experience with Remunicipalisation* (2015).

**David McDonald.** Professor of Global Development Studies, Queen's University, Canada. He is Director of the Municipal Services Project. He is the author or editor of numerous books including *Making Public in a Privatized World: The Struggle for Essential Services* (2016) and *Rethinking Corporatization and Public Utilities in the Global South* (2014).

**Evan McKenzie.** Professor and Head of the Political Science Department, University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the author or editor of several books including *Privatopia* and *Private Metropolis* (2021).

**Timothy Moss.** Senior Researcher at the Integrative Research Institute on Transformations of Human-Environment Systems at the Humboldt University of Berlin and Honorary Professor at the Leibniz University Hannover. He is the author of *Remaking Berlin: A History of the City through Infrastructure* (2020).

**Michael Pagano.** Professor of Public Administration, University of Illinois at Chicago. Former Dean of UIC's College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs (2007-2021) and former Director of

UIC's Government Finance Research Center. Co-editor of *Urban Affairs Review* (2001-14). He published twelve books, including *Metropolitan Resilience in a Time of Economic Turmoil*.

**Gregory Pierce.** Codirector of Luskin Center for Innovation, the University of California, Los Angeles. and the codirector of the UCLA Water Resources Group. He is also a faculty member in the UCLA Department of Urban Planning. He has numerous peer-reviewed journal articles and major research reports.

**Gail Radford.** Professor Emeritus of History, State University of New York at Buffalo. She is the author of *The Rise of Public Authority: State Building and Economic Development in Twentieth-Century America* (2013). Currently she is researching administrative reforms in 19th century New York State aimed at increasing grassroots participation in public education.

**Marco Rosaire Rossi.** Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science, University of Illinois at Chicago. His research focuses on American municipal socialism movements in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

**Jefferey Sellers.** Professor of Political Science and International Relations and Spatial Sciences, University of Southern California. He is the author or editor of several books including most recently *Multilevel Democracy: How Local Institutions and Civil Society Shape the Modern State* (2020).

**Todd Swanstrom.** Des Lee Professor of Community Collaboration and Public Policy Administration, University of Missouri, St. Louis. His books include *The Crisis of Growth Politics: Cleveland, Kucinich, and the Challenge of Urban Populism* (1985) and co-authored *Place Matters: Metropolitica for the Twenty-First Century* (3rd edition, 2014). He is co-authoring a book with Alan Mallach entitled *The Good Neighborhood*.

**Mildred Warner.** Professor in the Departments of City and Regional Planning and Global Development, Cornell University. Her work, based on comprehensive national databases of local government, is widely published in top academic journals. Her theory of pragmatic municipalism describes the range of behavior found across U.S. local governments.

**Heather Whiteside.** Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Waterloo and Fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs. She has published several books on the political economy of privatization, including most recently *Varieties of Austerity* (2021).

## ABSTRACTS

***Panel One. Origins of Municipalism: Historical and Conceptual Lessons***  
***Gail Radford. State University of New York at Buffalo***  
***Title: The Myth of American Hostility to Public Enterprise***

Widespread efforts to establish publicly owned and operated municipal services in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century U.S. are commonly thought to have faltered in the face of America's allegedly pro-capitalist political culture. However, ideology does not explain why U.S. cities did not move toward what one Progressive writer termed the "self-owned city." Proposals for municipal economic activity proved popular with the public in cities such as Milwaukee, Schenectady, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, and Cleveland. In some places, voters elected socialist mayors or city council members. In others, particular proposals for municipal enterprises garnered strong support.

The significant barriers were legal and financial. For a long time, judges insisted on an extremely narrow definition of legitimate public activity. Even after courts became less antagonistic toward government activism, stringent constitutional and statutory restrictions on borrowing (which exist into the present) made it practically impossible for cities to raise the capital necessary to set up agencies that could produce goods and services for public use within the framework of general-purpose government. The obstacles led to a massive detour – the public authority. The circuitous route and unfortunate destination of that detour is a long story, not to be told here. But a consequence is that to pursue re-municipalization means not just countering outright privatization and outsourcing, but also the devolution of municipal and state purposes to public authorities.

In any case, the historical record, reinforced by the political success of people like Bernie Sanders and my home city's India Walton, suggests that Americans are pragmatic and situational, and willing to back public enterprise when it looks like a good way to meet public needs. The record also suggests that success in re-municipalization may depend less on changing hearts and minds, and more on analyzing and overcoming organizational and institutional obstacles.

***Marco Rosaire Rossi. University of Illinois at Chicago***  
***Title: The Failure of the "Failure of Regulation"***

In 1910, the Milwaukee Social Democratic Party was swept into power. For two years, the socialists in Milwaukee had complete control of Milwaukee's city government, the school board, and the county government, along with several party members in the state legislature. Despite this political authority, the socialists found it challenging to enact their primary objective: the municipalization of Milwaukee's economy. To understand the Milwaukee Social Democratic Party's failure to realize its goals, this paper will examine the guiding ideology of the party, known as constructive socialism, and how it functioned within the confines of Milwaukee's municipal government. Specifically, it will explain how municipalization faced four main obstacles: lack of home rule authority; municipal debt; lack of progressive taxation options; and political will among the population. To deal with these obstacles, the socialists took a gradualist approach to municipalization, choosing to municipalize only a few minor enterprises, and often focused on various forms of pseudo-municipalization. These included aggressive franchise enforcement, the implementation of social efficiency policies, and the creation of community forms of collectivization. The experience of the Milwaukee Social Democratic Party demonstrates that even with political leaders dedicated to municipalization, it is difficult for municipalities to successfully take ownership of industries unless legal, political, and economic preconditions exist.

***Richardson Dilworth. Drexel University***  
***Title: Suburbanization, (Re)municipalization and the Right to Water***

The current global trend toward remunicipalization is most pronounced in water utilities, and I therefore focus here on water in telling a story of how the distinction between public and private municipal service



provision has evolved over time. There are six points I make in my story. My first point is that the very meaning of this divide has changed over time. For instance, there emerged in the nineteenth century a division between larger cities served by municipally-owned waterworks and smaller suburban communities served by private companies, yet many of those private water companies operated more like cooperatives, even if they were not identified as such.

My second point is that the early distinction between private water providers in the suburbs and municipal waterworks in larger cities was not only a self-reinforcing process, but one in which private water provision became culturally suburban as it was increasingly associated with independence from the central city, which often used its water supply to compel annexations. Third, the extent of the distinction between suburban private water providers and central city municipal waterworks depended in part on geography and early infrastructure investment. For instance, I suggest that one reason the largest American water company emerged from the suburbs of Philadelphia is because that central city never built an aqueduct system such as that which supplied New York City. The spatial and physical determinants and dynamics of the public-private distinction in water lay the groundwork for my fourth point, which is that corporate consolidations in the private water sector can also be conceived of as a despatialization of water in the sense that suburban water, though it was typically drawn from some local source, came increasingly to be provided by companies that themselves had no concrete spatial identity. By contrast, water provided by the municipal governments of big cities remained distinctly grounded in a unique space of ownership. Fifth, the corporate control and despatialization of suburban water set the groundwork for understanding water as an abstract human right devoid of spatial constraints – as the United Nations declared in 2010 – and one that was most often deployed specifically against the corporate control of water.

Finally, if in the nineteenth century private water companies were often small-scale cooperatives that provided the means for suburban water companies to stay independent of predatory political machines that controlled big city waterworks, by the turn of the twenty-first century it was central city municipal waterworks that were being preyed upon by global water companies, the primary customers of whom were mostly in the suburbs (at least in the United States). The fact that the very political meaning of the public-private divide in water provision has reversed itself over the course of two centuries suggests the limits to any explanation that simply sees recurrent “cycles” of privatization and municipalization.

**David McDonald. Queens University, CA**

**Title: *Back to the Future? Pendulum Swings and the Lessons of History for Remunicipalization***

**Panel Two. Capacity to Act: Legacy and Impact of Privatization in Cities**

**Gregory Pierce. University of California, Los Angeles**

**Title: *Beyond the Strategic Retreat? Explaining Urban Water Privatization’s Shallow Expansion***

This paper explains changes in the literature on urban water privatization in low- and middle-income countries and demonstrates the need for a revised research agenda. Since the Great Recession, privatization practice has subtly evolved, but scholarship has been slow to follow. This period of shallow growth is characterized by phenomena that have gone largely understudied: direct negotiation between private firms and cities, the greater role of domestic firms, privatization by coproduction, and a new geography. This study proposes a typology for planners to assess whether and where different forms of privatization may enhance water service in this new era.

**Martha Kaplan. Vassar College**

**Title: *Radically Municipal Water: Decolonizing the City in Singapore***

Trust in the state is crucial for water planning. At independence in 1965, Singapore’s Lee Kwan Yew opened the city-state to global capitalist investment and built enduring state-planned public institutions from housing to transport to utilities. At independence water-scarce Singapore faced loss of Malaysian water. Their public water utility mobilized cutting-edge state-directed technical expertise and the semiotic capacities of the decolonization moment (and beyond) to link water, public, city and nation. As US cities

like San Diego and Los Angeles consider recycled wastewater as an urban drinking water solution, what might they learn from Singapore's radically municipal water?

**Heather Whiteside. University of Waterloo**

**Title: Canadian Public Land Sales and UK Public Finance Initiative Handback: Contradictions and Opportunities**

Two cutting-edge initiatives currently unfolding in Canada and the UK add new dimensions to the privatization debate and challenge conventional (critical) analyses of alternatives to privatization: i) the sale of Canadian urban public land to First Nations collectives; ii) remunicipalization from above through UK Public Finance Initiative (PFI) handback. Examining these developments for their contradictions and opportunities, here I query the extent to which these initiatives represent progressive alternatives for cities shucking off legacies of dispossession, or whether they are instead ushering in new forms of urban inequality.

**Todd Swanstrom. University of Missouri, St. Louis**

**Title: Suburbanization as Privatization: The Future of the Public City**

In many ways, suburbanization has been not just a flight from cities but a flight from expansive government and extensive public commitments. In the early twentieth century the progressive movement helped to build up city governments as major providers of public goods and services. Cities competed to provide the most robust public good and services, including public health, public transit, parks, sanitation, roads, and street lighting. Suburbanites fled cities in part to escape paying high city taxes, especially if those tax revenues were going to be used to pay for public goods and services shared by people who looked different from them. Suburbs promote a privatized lifestyle which depends on the automobile over public transit and accessing many goods through the market rather than government – think private swimming pools over public pools, health clubs over public rec centers, country clubs over municipal golf courses. Data on the St. Louis metropolitan area shows that, with the important exception of schools, suburbs spend less on public goods and services than the central city. In short, suburbanization has been an integral part of the attack on government over the past half century. The renewed interest of college-educated millennials in city living raises the question of whether city revival can help revive commitments to the public sphere.

**Panel Three. De-Privatization in Cities: Resistance and Adaptation**

**Andrew Cumbers. University of Glasgow**

**Title: Remunicipalisation, Neoliberalism, and the Return of the State**

The first two decades of the twenty first century have witnessed a remarkable process of global de-privatisation, referred to at the local level as remunicipalisation. In a trend largely and wilfully ignored by political and economic elites, this reflects a marked reversal of the previous tendency towards the wholesale selling off or subcontracting out of essential services – including energy, water, and transport - to the private sector. I argue here that remunicipalisation is linked to broader and deeper currents in changing economic governance; namely the purported “return of the state” and a faltering project of neoliberalism. Although the shell or carapace of neoliberalism is crumbling, there are continued tensions between a growth-fuelled, intensifying process of private wealth accumulation, which is increasingly state-driven and basic social and ecological needs which remunicipalisation, in its spatially diverse ways, brings to the fore.

**Timothy Moss. Humboldt University**

**Title: The Many Faces of Municipalisation across Berlin's Turbulent History**

In this paper I show how a long-term historical perspective on a city's infrastructures can reveal radically diverse agendas behind the call for municipalisation. At first sight, municipalisation is about transferring ownership of an enterprise – such as a utility – to a local authority. While this is indisputably true, there is more to municipal acquisition than meets the eye. I argue here that focusing on the issue of ownership,



indeed, risks overlooking features of municipalisation of key political significance. I draw on historical evidence to illustrate some of the many faces of municipalisation encountered in Berlin across the twentieth century, ranging from Weimar municipalism, racist nationalism of the Nazi era, dismantling state socialism after reunification to social movements for equitable utilities today. I show how the political motives, framings and practices of municipalisation can vary hugely, even within a single city, encouraging fine-grained historical analyses of municipalism elsewhere.

***Emanuele Lobina. Public Services International Research Unit, University of Greenwich***

***Title: Remunicipalisation Versus the Zombie: A Taxonomy of Policy Containment Strategies***

This paper aims to shed light on the policy mechanisms of the containment (or reverse diffusion) of remunicipalisation. The focus here is on the resistance against water remunicipalisation as part of the zombification - that is, the survival of a policy that has failed and is no longer supported by the evidence (Quiggin, 2012) - of water privatisation. To achieve this aim, the paper looks at the case of Reggio Emilia, Italy, where political elites prevented the implementation of a local government's decision to remunicipalise water services. More precisely, an influential political party (whose national policy favours privatisation) did exert veto power, effectively reversing the formal decision of the governmental authorities responsible for the reform of local water services. This interference betrayed an elitist contempt for the principle of participatory decision-making. The grouping of local governments had in fact adopted the decision to remunicipalise after consulting experts and civil society.

The paper therefore calls for unpacking the black box of policy zombification by means of devising a taxonomy of policy containment strategies. The latter is based on the intensity of the attributes of zombification displayed by a policy and the zombification mechanisms that are more strongly associated with the survival of a failed policy. Peters and Nagel (2020) identify key mechanisms of policy zombification such as power, beliefs and ideology, the filtering of information, path dependence and the absence of alternatives. It is here suggested that the case of Reggio Emilia exemplifies the ideal type of acute zombification, whereby sheer power takes an overly prominent role relative to that of the filtering of information. Otherwise put, the emergence of acute zombification is dependent on an actor's muscles trumping the public sphere.

Comparing and contrasting the experience of Reggio Emilia with cases where containment power and control of the public sphere are intricately intertwined (Lobina et al., 2019) and where opportunities for policy change appear to be absent (Lobina, 2019), the paper identifies the following policy containment strategies of water remunicipalisation: acute zombification (in which case, containment power trumps the public sphere); eclectic zombification (in which case, containment power and control of the public sphere are in a dual relationship); and, pre-emptive zombification (in which case, opportunities for policy change are absent due to bottlenecks in the decision-making process).

***Germá Bel. University of Barcelona.***

***Title: Remunicipalisation: Are We Heading to a New “Progressive Era”?***

Remunicipalisation of local services has emerged as a relevant policy in many countries in the last decade. The rationale behind remunicipalisation decisions and implementation resemble those that triggered remunicipalisation in the Progressive Era, by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Are we, therefore, heading back to a new “Progressive Era”?

***Panel Four. Toward (Re)municipalism? The Future of Urban Public Services***

***Mildred Warner. Cornell University***

***Title: Pragmatic Municipalism: Understanding Trends in Local Government Service Delivery***

At the local government level in the U.S., the process of privatization been a dynamic one of experimentation with market delivery and return to public delivery when privatization fails to deliver. National survey data show what drives this experimentation are pragmatic concerns with service cost and

quality. To what extent will this process of pragmatic market management continue in the future as shifts in finance and regulatory environment favor private actors at the expense of local government?

**Nelson Lichtenstein. University of California, Santa Barbara**

**Title: Sectoral Bargaining on the State and Municipal Levels: Revisiting a Progressive Era Idea**

Wage boards and commissions were established by more than a dozen states in the Progressive Era. They were designed to set wages and working conditions for women and older children in traditionally "sweated" industries. Eighty years ago the Wagner Act and the rise of mass unionism eclipsed this reform impulse, but the idea had returned to the policy and political agenda in recent years because of the demise of traditional collective bargaining and the rise of a new universe of "sweated" industries and occupations. My paper considers how sectoral bargaining might once again become important to labor, reformers, and employers at the state and municipal levels.

**Rachel Havrelock. University of Illinois at Chicago**

**Title: The Price of Water, Climate Change, and Remunicipalizing Utilities**

Although observation of the aging and malfunction of American infrastructure has congealed into a widely recited maxim, questions of how to redesign it and how to pay for its upgrade remain fiercely debated topics. Despite a series of well-publicized public health and financial disasters, the privatization of water and sewer services remains a much-heralded solution. The State of Illinois, for example, has laid the political groundwork to facilitate privatization of water utilities. While attending to these trends, this paper looks at successful water remunicipalization efforts in cities like Benton Harbor, Michigan, and a consortium of suburbs around Bolingbrook, Illinois to examine how awareness of water's increasing value amidst accelerated climate change and the emerging importance of local control and water sovereignty contribute to the herculean efforts necessary to recover municipal jurisdiction over water supply and infrastructure. With water infrastructure untouched and, sometimes, more dysfunctional following privatization, how might (re)municipalized utilities address the abiding need? A potential federal infrastructure bill presents one avenue. Another rests in new ideas around water pricing for commercial and industrial users.

**Dennis Judd. University of Illinois at Chicago**

**Title: The American Municipality and the Eclipse of Local Democratic Governance**

Many contributors to the literature on American local governance have employed the phrase *the local state* to refer primarily to municipalities and their powers. For much of the nation's history such a singular focus on cities would have been justified; until the twentieth century the only other consequential units of governments were counties. Beginning in the 1920s, however, local governance became, at first gradually and then by leaps and bounds, fragmented into thousands of "special-purpose" local governments. Their numbers continued to grow because they provided a way of escaping the budgetary and statutory restraints imposed on general-purpose governments and because they offered a strategy for sharply separating policy expertise and project planning from the vicissitudes of electoral politics. More recently, public/private institutions of every kind share in the governance of metropolitan regions. Like most special-purpose governments, they are rarely bound by the democratic rules, processes, or norms. By contrast, mayors and other elected public officials must answer to voters, which tends to provoke whatever *sturm and drang* there is left in the public life of urban governance. Increasingly, the urban electorate is left debating symbolic issues that may be only tangentially connected to the distribution of the material resources that affect people's lives. In this presentation I explore the consequences of that development.