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Policy Innovation and Regime Practice: An Atlanta Overview

Social states of affairs are often much more to be explained by what can *be tacitly coordinated than by what anyone's preferences or reasoned outcomes might be.*

— Russell Hardin

This account of Atlanta has not only focused on how the city's post–World War II governing coalition was formed and modified, but has also given attention to the policy changes that were made along the way. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of postwar Atlanta is the high degree of policy innovation—the degree to which the governing coalition was dedicated to change and brought it about despite considerable opposition.

Public policies are not mere reflections of a community's social composition, nor are they mechanically determined by the economic system. Policy innovations—the critical decisions made in response to social change[1]—emerge from and reflect the character of a city's governing coalition. But they are not simply what the coalition partners want; indeed, regime allies sometimes have conflicting wants. Regime analysis instructs us that *policy innovation is not about individuals and their preferences*. In Atlanta, for example, some business leaders *personally* would have preferred that racial segregation be perpetuated, but the *business community* embraced a policy of moderate change because that policy met their regime-building needs. As members of a biracial governing coalition, business leaders learned to link their desire for economic prosperity with abandonment of die-hard segregation.

What can be learned from the Atlanta experience overall? To begin with, the policies adopted in post–World War II Atlanta are not radically different from those of many other cities over the same time span, and this should not be surprising. All cities in the United States faced the same basic chal-

lenges (metropolitan decentralization, changing race relations, and mobile capital), and the ingredients for regime building (private ownership of business and popular control of local government) were the same for all. Yet particulars are important, and neither the character of Atlanta's regime nor the policies it adopted are typical of urban America *in any degree of detail*. By reviewing the specifics of what Atlanta has done and why, we can see how policy actions (and inactions) are tied to the particulars of regime practice.

This chapter zeroes in on the strategies by which each of Atlanta's coalition partners positioned itself for participation in the governing coalition and how the fact of coalition coordination itself favors some policies over others. The political practices that constitute a regime are intertwined with policy initiatives in complex ways, each influencing the other. The character of a regime determines both its capacity to act and the direction that action will take. But policy actions also affect regimes, in some cases profoundly; they may, in fact, help define its character.

THE EARLY POSTWAR PERIOD: COHESION IN THE FACE OF CONTROVERSY

In the years following World War II, Atlanta more than any other Deep South city was noted for moderation in race relations. The city's mayor avoided race-baiting rhetoric and was often at odds with the state's political leaders on that count. The newspapers added to the city's climate of racial moderation and themselves became objects of derision in state politics for their concern about the treatment of blacks. For a time, Atlanta's stance was mainly symbolic: The city remained heavily segregated, and some of the concrete steps away from Jim Crow practice were taken—as in the case of the integration of public transit—only under the auspices of federal authority.

Even so, the city's racial moderation was of consequence. The mayor, especially, conferred on the city's black middle class a measure of personal respect extraordinary for the Deep South of that time, and this was an important gesture to a group ever restive under the customs of the South. More than that, interracial cooperation enabled Atlanta to achieve peaceful school desegregation in 1961—a time when racial turmoil ran at a high level and massive resistance was still official policy in much of the South. In the politics and race relations of the nation, Atlanta's ability to accomplish smoothly what had been so traumatic in Little Rock and New Orleans was no small matter; it demonstrated that peaceful school desegregation could be realized in a Deep South state.

Significantly, Atlanta's public position of racial moderation and token integration posed no challenge to Atlanta's business elite *as a business group*. Even though the personal predilections of individuals may have been over-

ridden, the group's collective interest in *economic* growth, reinforced by its political alliance with the black middle class, encouraged support for orderly racial change. But student sit-ins at downtown sites were another matter. They were aimed specifically at making deeper and more direct cuts into the prerogatives of business owners and managers. Not surprisingly, under direct challenge, business resistance was strong, and student protests achieved only a partial victory in Atlanta. Full integration of public accommodations came only after new federal laws required it, a step in which coalition-conscious public officials from Atlanta played an important role.

Racial moderation was only one part of an interrelated policy picture in Atlanta. It developed from a form of group reciprocity in which the mayor and white business executives promoted racially responsible behavior by whites, in exchange for which black leaders acquiesced in a policy of massively reordering land use in central Atlanta, giving the downtown elite the buffer zone they wanted around the central business district.

Some years ago, when Robert Whelan and I compared urban renewal in Atlanta and Baltimore, we found some distinctive differences in Atlanta's approach to redevelopment. Although both cities had active programs, Atlanta was more likely to execute total clearance and to shift land from residential to nonresidential use.[2] Atlanta also built more new public housing.[3] Indeed, though Atlanta is not among the nation's largest cities, it has the fifth largest public housing program.[4] And, as we saw in the discussion of the era of negotiated settlements, public housing was only a part of the city's conflict-ridden relocation effort. The FHA 221(d)2 program, nonprofit-sponsored apartments, and negotiated neighborhood transitions were also part of the plan by which land use was changed and new areas opened for black residential use. On all counts, then, Atlanta's program entailed a high level of social conflict.

This extensive program of altering land use, with its enormous potential for conflict, could be managed only by a governing coalition capable of maintaining its unity in the face of intense opposition. For Atlanta, that was not easy, since most displacement fell on the city's black population. Much more was involved, then, than a simple logroll between two groups. It is true that blacks received a community stance of racial moderation in exchange for giving up close-in land and taking "expansion" land farther out. A group bargain was thus involved, but it was only part of the overall process. Particular benefits were also accorded to strategically placed black interests—land for the Atlanta University complex, deposits in black financial institutions, donations to black nonprofit organizations, and profit opportunities for black real-estate brokers and builders.

Extensive bargaining over expansion land and the efforts to gather resources for building new housing are significant in themselves; they created a vast reservoir of skill in biracial negotiation. This habit of biracial bargaining and

cooperation could then be applied to new areas of conflict as they arose. Several factors thus converged to maintain the coalition, and individual incentives (or selective incentives, as they are called by students of collective behavior) in particular helped to preserve the overall group bargain. Repeated interactions in dealing with issues that were both concrete and controversial served to cement the coalition and promote cooperation across racial lines.

The activities holding the coalition together were integral to the city's policy effort. They enabled the coalition to maintain cohesion in the face of widespread controversy and community opposition. The richness and depth of biracial cooperation also sustained the governing coalition through the period when student protests generated great tension between the coalition partners and the bases of black leadership began to diversify.

Lest we assume that the outcomes of events in Atlanta were inevitable, it should be remembered that an alternative policy position was quite possible. Small property holders—business and residential, black and white—favored a less active program of restructuring land use. Indeed, some other cities in the South opted for less government action on behalf of redevelopment.[5] And Atlanta's real-estate board was a formidable opponent of public land acquisition, characterizing the city's redevelopment program as a "socialist" violation of private enterprise. However, the various sources of opposition never coalesced into an alliance capable of governing the city. By contrast, throughout the urban-renewal era, mayors Hartsfield and Allen and their downtown business allies worked hard to enlist and keep black allies so that this partnership could retain its capacity to govern.

TRANSITION AND RESTABILIZATION

The 1960s were years of transition. The habit of biracial cooperation was embedded deeply enough to secure the governing coalition for a time, but as the decade wore on, the coalition became unsteady. Federal court decisions and administrative guidelines helped to diversify the city's black leadership further and to give an opening to neighborhood champions. Displacement and residential transition reached proportions that outran the old system of negotiated settlements and eroded the process through which particular benefits and cross-racial interaction bound the coalition.

At this stage, regime change seemed likely. The downtown business elite suffered notable electoral defeats in the first MARTA referendum in 1968 and in a succession of mayoral elections starting in 1969. Business leadership also failed to achieve annexation or some form of metropolitan reorganization to offset the emerging black electoral majority. The feat of the 1951 Plan of Improvement was not repeated, and the failure to enlarge the city boundaries illustrated just how limited the power of the business elite was, standing