Governing the Gilded Age City: A New Dataset on Local Institution Building During the Machine and Progressive Eras

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How did urban political leaders respond to the tumult of the late 1800s and early 1900s? Dramatic population growth, immigration, economic instability, inequality, and industrialization created new policy demands that pushed local governments to grow in capacity. One of the tools the expansion of power, capacity, and scope of local government was the creation and staffing of local appointed boards and commissions. In this paper, we introduce a new dataset of political institution building which documents appointed boards and commissions across four major cities: Boston, MA, Chicago, IL, Denver, CO, and Los Angeles, CA from the late 1800s to the 1930s. We supplement these data with measures of local organizational life and political machine versus progressive control of local politics. Using these data, we trace the effectiveness of local political movements, how policy agendas fluctuated over time, and the long-term consequences of temporary political disputes.

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Introduction

The United States changed dramatically from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, with much of this change focused on urban areas. Explosive population growth, increased demands from residents for services, political conflicts, rising inequality, and expansions of group rights created new policy demands that pushed local governments to grow in capacity. In this article, we focus on the creation, staffing, and powers of appointed boards and commissions as a mechanism for understanding the extension of urban policy making, as well as who holds power, how cities evolved, and the persistence of political institutions.

We focus on how appointed boards provide evidence of two interrelated phenomena during this period: the rise of political machines and progressive movements, and an increased density in civic engagement and organizational life in cities. We introduce a new dataset of political institution building: a full documentation of urban boards across four major cities: Boston, MA, Chicago, IL, Denver, CO, and Los Angeles, CA from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. We supplement these data with measures of local organizational life, political control, and economic conditions, as well as deep case discussions to provide a context for each of the cases. We employ these data to examine two key questions in political development: In what ways do political institutions reflect the preferences of those in elected power? And when and how are organized groups successful in shaping policy?

Using these boards, we investigate evidence that local political regimes had lasting impact on policy via the institutionalization of policy making in appointed boards. The late 1800s and early 1900s were characterized by extensive political conflict, particularly over the control of local resources. One central consequence was the rise of two forms of political organization: urban party machines and the progressive movement, both of which responded by expanding the power, capacity, and scope of local government (Sahn 2023; Trounstine 2008; 2006; Stone 1996). Control over city resources was a central means by which machines maintained and expanded their power (Trounstine 2008; 2006). In comparison, the progressive movement pursued two seemingly at-odds goals: to remove the machinations of government as far as possible from ordinary voters,[1] while opening up new avenues for public engagement in policymaking (Buenker 1973; Bridges 1999). These contradictory goals led progressive reformers to seek out institutional reforms that would facilitate the dilution of the power of political machines and immigrant voters, while also providing citizen input into policymaking (Pincetl 2003; Buenker 1973). Appointed boards offered such an opportunity. But recent work often points to the null effects of the Progressive movement on local policy outcomes (Carreri, Payson, and Thompson 2023; Sahn 2023). We use the presence of Progressive and Machine political leaders in our cities to show how Progressives were successful in implementing civil service reforms in their cities in the form of oversight boards.

During this period, we also see a dramatic increase in civic engagement in cities, with the rise of the growth of labor unions, and broadening of local organizations (Gamm

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[1] Or the "crowd of illiterate peasants," so named by Andrew White, a progressive activist and first president of Cornell University (Judd 1979).

and Putnam 1999; Schlesinger 1944; Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003; Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000). Accompanying this rise was the birth of the Women's Club movement and a broad movement of women into public civic life, focused first on literary and education causes and then on a broader set of issues relating to community, children, and caring for others (Bowden 1930; Missemer and Vianna Franco 2024). These social changes produced a broad impetus for broadening the scope of local government. We use our boards data to examine the ways that local organizational capacity translated into policy via boards, showing that, counter to dominant narratives, clubs and societies did not drive cultural policymaking, but women's organizing did prompt cities to create policies in the areas of children, health, and poverty.

Local governance has been shaped by the existence and actions of local boards and commissions throughout American history, but systematic data on their creation and membership has been rare. These data speak to key questions in the study of urban political development, as well as theoretical and empirical questions concerning American political parties, policy-making, civic and organizational culture, and women and politics.

Governing cities in the late 1800s and early 1900s

The latter part of the 1800s saw rapid increases in the size of cities due to immigration, shifts in the economy, and a growing U.S. population; each elevated demand for city policies to address a wide set of social ills (Dilworth 2010). Table 1 demonstrates the rapid rise of urban populations in the four cities in our data, as well as the nation as a whole. In 1880, Boston was already the fifth largest city in the U.S., and it doubled again in the 50 years between 1880 and 1930 (at which point it had dropped to ninth largest). A mere 35,000 people lived in Denver in 1880; by 1930, the city was eight times larger. The growth of Los Angeles is in a category all its own. The city is the home of just over 10,000 people in 1880. In a mere 50 years, the city grows to more than 1.2 million (110 times its size in 1880) and replaces Boston as the fifth largest city. Chicago's growth is not quite as dramatic (it increases just 6.7 times across this period) but its size is exceptional. Half a million people lived in Chicago in 1880, which made it the fourth largest city in the country. By 1930, Chicago had earned its moniker the Second City, and boasted almost 3.5 million people, two million more than Boston.

Table 1: The rapid expansion of urban centers in the United States, 1880-1930

	US overall		Our case studies				
	urban population	*% urban pop*	*Denver*	*Boston*	*Los Angeles*	*Chicago*	*All four cities*
1880	14.1	26%	35,629	362,839	11,183	503,185	912,836
1890	22.1	28%	106,713	448,477	50,395	1,099,850	1,705,435
1900	30.2	40%	133,859	560,892	102,479	1,698,575	2,495,805
1910	42.0	46%	213,381	670,585	319,198	2,185,283	3,388,447
1920	54.2	51%	256,491	748,060	576,673	2,701,705	4,282,929
1930	69.0	56%	287,861	781,188	1,238,048	3,376,438	5,683,535

Source: U.S. Census. US urban population in millions.

This rapid growth put great stress on city services. Cities struggled to provide clean water and sewage control, especially as both proved essential to control the spread of diseases like cholera and yellow fever (Melosi 2008; Duffy 1992; Capers 1938; Strach and Sullivan 2023). Infrastructure demands like the need to construct roads, bridges, and canals (Oestreicher 1989) required both funding and a set of individuals to make decisions about the policy implementation. Excess garbage demanded policies and services around pick up and disposal (Strach and Sullivan 2023). These policy demands often overwhelmed local government, as political elites searched for solutions. Local public boards and commissions offered one solution.

Boards had been part of town governance from the early days of the United States but were far less formal and permanent as they came to be. In Colonial America, the political elites eschewed cities for a mostly rural and agrarian lifestyle (P. Ethington and Levitus 2009). A limited urban population and the use of direct democracy among white propertied men as the primary decision-making structure contributed to a limited set of governing institutions in cities (Dilworth 2010). The small, concentrated urban population of the United States from Colonial rule to the Civil War meant that local governments rarely used permanent appointed boards, with the exception of the largest cities (Herndon and Challú 2013). Instead, many cities used ad-hoc boards to make decisions ranging from the location of cemeteries to disease control to police oversight.

Following the Civil War, the growth of urban areas led to the emergence of appointed boards as a tool to address specific policy demands. Boards focused on the key policy issues of the time: public health concerns (including things like addressing water borne illnesses), sanitary reforms (including sewage or garbage, the creation and care of public parks, policing and fire response), and educational governance (Peterson 1979; Reps 1954; Rosen 2003). Urban crises like the great fires in Boston, Chicago, and Baltimore pushed cities to transform ill-functioning boards into effective bodies that were permanent parts of the local governing structure (Rosen 2003). During this time, board members were almost entirely local political elites and the overlap between appointed board members and elected officials was quite high.

City charters, the legal documents that govern some city's powers and responsibilities, began to formalize specific sets of local powers for boards in the late 1800s and early 1900s (McBain 1917). Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, boards increasingly appeared in city charters, with details of which boards cities could create, who appointed their members, and the responsibilities of boards. As the legal relationship between cities and their states shifted in various ways, the power (or lack thereof) to create boards was often the focus of discussions.

These demographic shifts and the policy crises of urban America in the late 1800s—filth, failing infrastructures, disease, and populations demanding government support—gave rise to political machines, or party organizations that recruited voter support by supplying material incentives like jobs, access to government policies, or government contracts. In response to corruption, associated rising costs of city governance, and general discomfort with the power that immigrants had in political machines, the Progressive movement engaged in efforts to control local politics in the United States (Sahn 2023). In the 1800s and early 1900s, both machines and

progressives saw boards as a tool to accomplish political ends: the ability to nominate supporters to board vacancies, control resources, and limit the power of political opponents.

Political machines

Political machines emerged in US cities in the mid- and late-1800s, controlling politics in some cities for the next century or more (Trounstine 2008). Emerging from the growth of cities, inflows of immigrant populations, and increased demands for services, political machines consolidated competing political factions under a single umbrella of centralized power (Arnold 2013). These political parties, whose goals were to control resources and exchange material resources for voter loyalty, looked for opportunities within city structures to facilitate their goals.

Appointed boards, both in the creation of new boards and the staffing of existing boards, offered machines key opportunities to reward followers with patronage and to consolidate power in the hands of political friends and allies (Stone 1989). Boards provided multiple opportunities: appointments to plum positions could be offered to powerful supporters as a reward, board-approved public spending on services and goods could be funneled to supporter's businesses or to provide jobs for followers, and control of the boards allowed for the machine to further regulate the full operation of the city. Perhaps the most useful board for political machines were election boards, which facilitated a variety of underhanded and corrupt schemes to suppress votes of opponents and elevate votes for the machine (Allswang 1977). But political machines created and staffed boards as diverse as industrial oversight commissions (by which machines could control the ability of voters to do their work and extract resources from them and businesses) to welfare services (where machines allocated funds to loyal voters) to civil service commissions that oversaw the employment, retention, and, if needed, firing of city workers who were loyal (or not) to the machine.

Progressives

In comparison to political machines, the progressive movement was deeply interested in the creation of boards. Primarily motivated by the goal of limiting the power that political machines, the people—businessmen, intellectuals, and the middle-class—who made up the progressive movement focused their attention on several key government reforms, including shifting the election of alderman from wards to at-large seats, pushing for non-partisan local elections, and increasing the power of city managers and other appointed bureaucratic officials (Rice 2014). They also focused attention on creating new forms of government that would act as checks against the power of the machines. It is in these reforms that structural frameworks emerged which allowed the practice of appointed boards to flourish in US cities. The many goals of the progressive movement included limiting the power of ordinary voters to support political machines and opening up new avenues for public engagement in policymaking (Buenker 1973). To pursue these goals, progressive reformers pursued institutional reforms that would dilute the power of political machines (and their supporters), while also providing citizen input into policymaking (Pincetl 2003; Buenker 1973). Appointed boards provided a natural venue for accomplishing these goals: progressives could

expand the set of individuals involved in making decisions for the city, while still controlling access to these positions of power.

As cities expanded and transformed at the end of the 1800s and early 1900s, the fight between progressives and political machines shaped the form and function of cities that persists into the modern day (Erie 1992; Stone 1996; Trounstine 2008). Machines and progressives sought to consolidate power through a variety of levers of control, including creating new boards and appointing supporters to boards (Haas 1988; Tyler 2009). Such boards were (and are) a primary tools for local governments to engage in specific forms of policymaking, from planning and zoning to hospitals, libraries, and pensions (Dahl 1961; Lucas 2016). The creation, and elimination, of specific boards are indicators of the issues prioritized by governing coalitions, and the groups they sought to appease and reward with initiatives. The membership of boards offer insight into who comprised the political elite and merited patronage.

Historic board databases

We introduce two interrelated datasets for public use: First, we provide a **board dataset**, which includes a variety of information about the work of the board, who nominates members, how many members, and how this information varies by years and when the board first appears in official records. Second, we provide a **member dataset**, which features detailed information about the individual members who serve on these boards, including their names, dates of service, who nominated or appointed them, and their gender and race. For some members, we also have collected a broader set of professional and political information, including other organizational leadership positions.

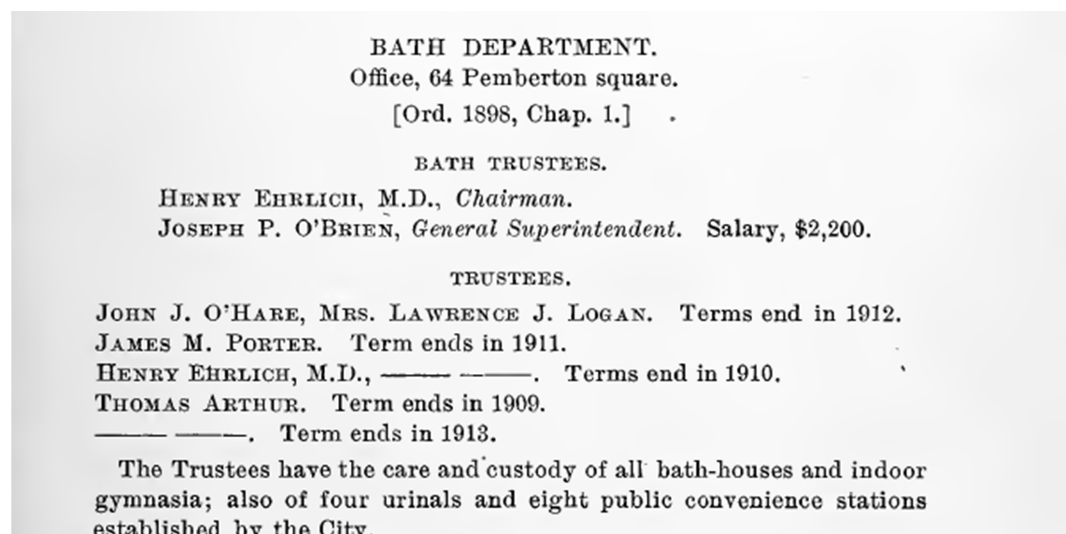
Today, most American cities make information about the membership of their local boards and commissions available on their public websites. Locating this information for any year prior to the present, however, can be a challenge, and that challenge only grows as we move further back in history. Such record-keeping was simply not a priority for over-burdened and under-resourced city governments. Our data collection strategy focused on major cities for which these data are available in various archives and documents. We collect and code information about which boards exist and who sits on all appointed boards in Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, and Denver from as early as date are available to the 1930s from the following sources.

The city of Los Angeles provides an electronic database of all public officials, both elected and appointed, since 1850. For each board member appointed in each of these years, the data indicate the date when their term starts and when their term ends. Using this information, we create the board composition of each board in each year. Our analysis frame from 1870 to 1930, includes more than 16,000 board member names.

Boston produced (and still produces) an annual municipal register that lists all members of "Officials in charge of executive departments." These include all board members and officials appointed by the mayor and "various city, county, and state officials." We collected data from Boston from 1901 to 1930 which includes more than

4,700 board member names. The Boston municipal register contains a variety of information about the boards and their members. For example, Figure 1 shows the entry for the Bath Trustees in 1908. Information provided includes the number and name of the trustees, when their terms expire (if they do), and a description of the Trustee's work: ''have the care and custody of all bath-houses and indoor gymnasia; also of four urinals and eight public convenience stations established by the City." The Bath Trustees appear in the Boston Municipal register from 1901 to 1912 only. Other boards, such as a Board of Appeal, appear for the entirety of our data collection period.

Figure 1: 1908 Bath Trustees in Boston



BATH DEPARTMENT.
Office, 64 Pemberton square.
[Ord. 1898, Chap. 1.]

BATH TRUSTEES.

HENRY EHRLICH, M.D., *Chairman*.
JOSEPH P. O'BRIEN, *General Superintendent*. Salary, $2,200.

TRUSTEES.

JOHN J. O'HARE, MRS. LAWRENCE J. LOGAN. Terms end in 1912.
JAMES M. PORTER. Term ends in 1911.
HENRY EHRLICH, M.D., ——— ———. Terms end in 1910.
THOMAS ARTHUR. Term ends in 1909.
——— ———. Term ends in 1913.

The Trustees have the care and custody of all bath-houses and indoor gymnasia; also of four urinals and eight public convenience stations established by the City.

In Denver, Corbett, Hoye, and Co. (a private publishing company) produced a city directory that includes a full accounting of all elected and appointed officials, as well as listings of all businesses and individuals in the city, membership of the boards of private organizations, and details about geographic location for all citizens. We extract information about appointed boards from this directory for most years between 1885 and 1923 (when publication of these directories ended in Denver). Data for Denver include more than 3,100 board member names. The Denver directories also contain a variety of additional information about the residents of Denver, including their home addresses, employers, and the names of the heads and boards of all social and charitable organizations in the city. For example, in the 1915 almanac, the president of the library board is Miss Anne Evans (see figure 2). Further on in the almanac, we learn that Anne Evans works at Business Services Co, which "sells banks and all kinds of high-grade business propositions." Still further, we discover that she is a "casr" (cashier) and works at 212 Boston Bldg. William S Friedman, the vice president of the library board, also serves on the State Board of Charities and Corrections. We also learn from the Almanac that he is the rabbi at Temple Emanual and he lived at 733 8th Ave.

Figure 2: 1915 Library Board in Denver

LIBRARY COMMISSION.
City Library.
PRESIDENT..........MISS ANNE EVANS
Vice-President..Rev. William S. Friedman
W. P. McPhee, Mrs. Jasper A. Writer,
Frederick R. Ross, F. D. Stackhouse,
H. B. Smith, John Campbell.
Librarian................Chalmers Hadley

In Chicago, the annual *Chicago Daily News Almanac and Yearbook* reports on the membership of local boards and commissions in the City of Chicago and for Cook County. We analyze these data for 1888-1926 (though data are sparse prior to 1900), covering almost 2,000 board members. The *Almanac* contains a wide variety of information about the world (including, but not limited to, information about the US debt, the marital status of prisoners, and the pounds of pork packed in major American cities). Board data varies from year to year, but generally includes such information as is contained in Figure 3: the names and positions of the members of the board along with information on the staff and the duties; for example, the Board of Local Improvements is responsible for overseeing infrastructure improvements such as "sewers, house drains, water mains, water service pipes" and more.

Figure 3: 1911 Board of Local Improvement in Chicago

BOARD OF LOCAL IMPROVEMENTS.
City hall, second floor.
Members—Albert F. Keeney, R., president; John Minwegen, D., vice-president; Felix A. Norden, R.; Vincent J. Jozwiakowski, R.; John Burns, R.
Superintendent of Special Assessments and Secretary—Charles A. V. Standish.
Engineer Board of Local Improvements—George C. D. Lenth.
Chief Engineer of Streets—John B. Hittell.
Superintendent of Sidewalks—N. E. Murray.
Chief Clerk Special Assessments—T. Sullivan.
Duties—The board of local improvements is that part of the city of Chicago government created by law for the purpose of making local improvements the cost of which is paid by special assessments or direct taxation on the property directly and indirectly benefited. Among such local public improvements are sewers, house drains, water mains, water service pipes, sidewalks, street and alley paving and the taking of private property by condemnation proceedings for the purpose of opening, extending or widening public highways.

We summarize the resulting **membership** dataset in Table 2. Across four cities, the GGAC member dataset covers 150 city-year observations and includes information on nearly 26,000 board members. The dataset includes the full name of every member, permitting us to estimate member gender. We have clear term of service information for Boston and Los Angeles; in Chicago and Denver, yearly observations permit us to gauge term as well. The Denver data are particularly rich as they include information on member's addresses, occupations, and employers.

Table 2. Governing the Gilded Age City Member Dataset

city	years covered	board members	member term	member address	member occupation	member employer
Boston	1901-1930	4,700	Y			
Chicago	1888-1926	2,000				
Denver	1885-1923	3,100		Y	Y	Y
Los Angeles	1885-1930	16,000	Y			

The GGAC board dataset provides extensive data at the level of the board. Table 3 indicates the number of total boards in each city during our time period. A few boards persist across the entire period of data availability, while others die off and yet others are created (and survive or die) during this period. As with the member data, these data include the name of the board and a coding of the board topic.

Table 3. Governing the Gilded Age City Board Dataset

City	years covered	total number of boards	board description	salary	who appoints
Boston	1901-1930	997	Y	Y	Y
Chicago	1888-1926	553	Y		
Denver	1885-1923	550	Y		Y
Los Angeles	1885-1930	2,061			

City regime type and civic organizations

We further supplement these data with information on city governance and the power of civic organizations in each city over time. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, we code whether the sitting mayor represents a progressive or

machine governing coalition. *Machine* mayors are those whom scholars and archival news sources identify as active in machine politics or who clearly align with machine goals, particularly incentive-based exchanges of resources for votes and the mobilization of immigrant voters (Trounstine 2006; 2008). *Progressive* mayors engage in Progressive efforts, shifts to governance structures (such as implementing a council-manager form of government), and anti-corruption campaigns (Hays 1964; Anzia 2012; Carreri, Payson, and Thompson 2023; Sahn 2023). *Unaffiliated* mayors are those we could not definitively classify as either reform or machine; the majority of these served in the early years of our dataset. Across our four cities, a progressive mayor held office 10% of the time in in Boston, 25% in Chicago, 30% in Denver and 38% in Los Angeles.

We construct two measures of civic organizations in each city. Using city directories, we generate a count of all local organizations (including clubs, societies, associations, fraternal organizations, and unions) (Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen 2004). We construct two independent variables of interest from this data: (a) the number of organizations listed overall in each city for each decade, and (b) the total number of organizations that explicitly identify a woman's membership in their name e.g., ladies auxiliary, women's club ("women's clubs) or list women in top leadership positions such as president, secretary, or treasurer. We interpolate these values to years between the decades.

Both the political regime and the organizational capacity of cities vary across both time and place. This offers the opportunity to examine the impact of different kinds of governing coalitions on the priorities represented by both the creation of boards and the membership of those bodies.

Board remits

These data provide empirical evidence of the increased use of boards in cities at the turn of the last century, as part of a general consolidation and institutionalization of city governments. To fully explore the ways that these boards represent the institutionalization of policy, we code each board into one of sixteen issue areas. Table 4 below provides details on these issue areas and examples from our cities.

Table 4. Board issue categories

Remit area	Explanation	Example
Children and education	including schools (not elected school boards), family assistance, delinquency, orphans	Schoolhouse department
Civil rights	including immigration, women's status, and disabilities	Immigration and statistics

Civil service	including pensions, hiring, and the regulation of public employees	Board of civil service commissioners
Code regulation	including code enforcement and regulation of trades	Wool and wool growing
Culture	including arts, music, museums, and library	The art institute of Chicago
Economic development	including tax incentives, improvement districts, tourism, and other development-oriented services	Boston metropolitan district
Environment	including animal control, agriculture, trees and forests, and air and water quality	Board of water commissioners
Elections	including regulation of public officials, city employees, and elections	Election commissioners
Fire and Police	including public safety	Board of fire commissioners
Health	including public health and infectious diseases	Consumptives hospital trustees
Infrastructure	including public works, ports, bridges, and roads	Transit commission
Judicial	including judges, criminal enforcement, and sentencing	Board of motion picture censors
Parks and recreation	including parks, pools, sports, and recreation activities	Board of playground commissioners
Planning	including zoning and design review	Area planning commission
Poverty and poor people	including social services and redistributional policies	Overseers of the poor
Taxes and budgeting	including income tax regulation, budget oversight, and municipal borrowing	Chicago tax commission

Case studies to understand board creation

Our data offer a nuanced description of city governance during a key period in American urban development. In addition to measures of boards and board membership, population, regime, and organizational life, we provide narrative case studies of each of our four cities to further contextualize the patterns revealed in the quantitative data.

Boston, MA

Boston, one of the first large American cities, underwent dramatic demographic changes in the 1800s and early 1900s. Of particular importance for Boston politics and life, the city was a primary destination for emigrating Irish, fleeing the potato famines of the 1800s (1845-1852). This, coupled with a general move towards urban life, led to a six-fold growth in the city's population from 1850 (130,000 residents) to 1920 (748,060). The Puritans who formed the majority of the political elites in the city, reacted with violence and nativism, including the growth of the anti-Catholic Know Nothing movement (Quinn 2010; Haynes 1897). Eventually, the Irish Catholics, through voting numbers, corruption, and scheming by machine leaders, gained political power in the city.

Boston is also the story of political machines and their power in America. By the turn of the century, the city would become a traditional machine city, where ward bosses and a political apparatus dedicated to trading incentives for political power thrived with power from Irish immigrant support (Erie 1990). Hugh O'Brien took office in 1885, marking the official start of Democratic Irish political power in the city. Although O'Brien would only serve for four one-year terms, his election kicked off more than seventy years of Irish Catholic political power in the city, despite robust opposition from Republican Protestant "Yankees." The machine's reign ended with James Michel Curley, the most famous of the Irish machine bosses, who took office in 1914 and held political control in the city until his defeat in 1949.

All the Irish machine mayors used Boston's board structure as a mechanism for power consolidation and patronage. By 1887, two years into his administration, O'Brien had installed Irish Catholics as the city clerk, the chairman of the Boston School Committee, and as representatives on a wide set of other powerful boards and commissions (O'Connor 1998). He also removed three members of the Park Commission and replaced them with loyal Irish Catholic Democrats, a move decried by a local newspaper (Blodgett 1976).

Under O'Brien, the city of Boston enacted a city charter reform. One of the primary targets of the reform was a ward system where councilors (12 in total) and aldermen (73

in total) engaged in a wide set of corrupt acts[2] (including how they managed boards[3]) and the mayor served as an "ornamental figurehead." This changed significantly under the new charter, which "placed in the hands of the Mayor the entire charge of and responsibility for the conduct of the executive business of the city."[4] This included shifting a broader set of appointments to the mayor.[5] O'Brien and subsequent machine mayors would take full advantage of this change. By the time Curley was elected in 1914, appointments were seen as a routine form of power granted to the mayor.[6]

Los Angeles, CA

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the population of Los Angeles exploded from 5,000 residents in 1870 to more than a million residents in 1930. With these population changes came political changes, including the creation of a much more stable local government (with a major charter revision in the 1920s) and a wide set of conflicts over political resources. A weak political machine emerged in the late 1800s but was quickly overrun by progressive reformers, who held power in the city throughout the early 1900s. As Erie (1990, 521) notes, early interventions by the business community into politics in Los Angeles "had an ad hoc and episodic quality."

The rapid population growth in Los Angeles was accompanied by a great deal of scrambling to provide local services. Initially, the city produced policy through a variety of ad hoc boards and commissions; by 1870, there were more than 80 ad hoc boards in the city. Moving into the later decades of the 1800s, the total number of boards declined, but the ones in existence became more stable and powerful. The late 1800s thus saw the creation of boards still in operation in Los Angeles today like the Parks Board (1871), the Planning Commission (1880), the Public Works Board (1871), and the Board of the Public Library (1890). Los Angeles created an additional set of powerful boards, often due to the maneuvering of a strong Progressive movement, including Civil Service (1902), Housing (1904), and Efficiency (1913).

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[2] A local newspaper celebrated the change, noting that policy would no longer be made "by practically irresponsible committees of aldermen or councilmen, or both … be placed under the charge of competent chiefs, each accountable directly and solely to the mayor, and he to the people, so that the humblest citizen may know in every case whom to seek, whom to blame and whom to praise at City Hall." *The Boston Transcript,* Jan 23, 1885

[3]In 1887, the *Boston Post* proclaimed that John H. Lee, chairman of the Committee on Sewers, "for the good of the entire city as well as the credit of the district. . . should be beaten, and badly beaten, too." *Post*, Aug. 18, 1885

[4] *Boston Transcript*, June 1, 1885, as quoted in Galvin (1977).

[5] Republicans in the state legislature repeatedly attempted to introduce additional changes that would reduce the power of the Irish Catholic machine, including passing legislation in 1903, 1904, and 1906 that changed the size and composition of the Board of Aldermen. The machine adapted and were able to elect Democratic and Irish Catholic representatives on the new Board of Aldermen after each attempt (Zolot 1975).

[6] Later in Curley's tenure, the city council would try to reign in Curley through the control of the Financial Committee (or FinCom) and "Curley's first move was to seek abolition of the FinCom through legislation. When that failed, he tried to bribe members of with plum jobs in return for resignations" (G. O'Neill 2012, 89).

Progressive reformers in the city successfully lobbied for a full-scale revision of the city's charter by the state of California in 1925. The new charter created a broad set of new boards (many of which still operate today) and greatly expanded the power of specific boards that the progressives believed would accomplish their goals of helping the city grow, encouraging business, and protecting white supremacy (Erie 1992).[7]

Denver, CO

The city of Denver underwent dramatic changes in the size and politics of the city across the late 1800s and early 1900s. In 1870, the city had a population of 4,759 and was largely just a stop for cattle trains moving across the state. But the construction of railroad lines into the city, the designation of the city as the state's capital, and a silver boom in surrounding areas drove the population up to over 35,000 by 1880, over 100,000 by 1900, and over a quarter of a million residents by 1920. In the early days of explosive growth, the city was largely governed by a criminal mob that was vaguely interested in politics. Mob bosses like Lou Blonger and Soapy Smith engaged in broad racketeering and corruption to run gambling and prostitution, and enforced those enterprises with violence (Spude 2012). But soon (largely spurred by the 1893 depression and a collapse of the silver market), efforts at reform would wrest control from these forces and lay groundwork for first populist than progressive reformers to control local politics. The 1893 market collapse would also set off a variety of violence racist and nativist movements in Denver, eventually cumulating in the election of KKK members as the mayor of Denver in 1923 and the Governor of Colorado in 1925.

A variety of state and local crises and corruption prompted the emergence of an *Efficiency Movement* locally in Denver in the late 1890s. In 1902, progressive reformers in the city successfully lobbied for the merging of the city and the county of Denver together, along with a comprehensive reform of the city's charter and political organization. These changes were accompanied by an alignment of the city government with economic forces in the city, who advocated for the creation of a broad set of appointed boards and commissions (King 1911).

Still, progressives would not fully capture political control of the city until the 1910s, when they successfully elected a slate of local candidates to the mayor and city council. The progressives quickly enacted a full commission style government, whereby voters directly elected the heads of various agencies in the city (Mitchell 1966). Unter the "Galveston-Des Moines" commission form of government, cities elect no mayor or council, just a board of representatives, each of whom served as the chief executive of a city policy area like a streets, water, or civil service department (Sahn 2023; Rice 2014; Mitchell 1972). Denver progressives were following other progressive reformers, who saw a commission plan as an opportunity to create structural changes that would "do more than tinker with charters or elect short-lived reform administrations" (Rice 2014, xvi).

[7] The Los Angeles Progressives were also interested in any work that reduce the power of political machines. For example, George Alexander's attempts at mayor's attempts to produce a "real business administration" (Schiesl 1975) included the re-creation of a police commission that would have "the freedom in the administration of public affairs from the dictation of political bosses and influence of political considerations" (*Pacific Outlook* 1909).

Despite the enthusiasm for this “efficient” style of government, the Denver experiment quickly failed as commission heads could not agree on budgeting, cooperation, or get employees to perform basic operations in the city (Mitchell 1966). Reformers would lose the next election, with a return to a standard strong mayor system of government. The local political machine and reformers would trade election victories over the next twenty years, each desperate to erase the previous administration’s work. While the number, form, and focus of boards and commissions shifted across this time, the stochastic nature of changes evens out, with a lasting legacy from both machine and progressive administrations on which boards exist and who is appointed to these boards.

Chicago, IL

Chicago stands out as a representation of the growth and challenges of cities during this time period. Moving from a population of less than half a million in 1880 to more than 3 million in 1930, politics and policymaking were dominated by immigration, industrialization, and political corruption. We begin our examination of Chicago in the decade following the Great Chicago Fire, which decimated the quickly growing city in 1871. And yet, even as the fire killed hundreds and left more than 100,000 residents without homes, the city and its government rebounded quickly. Aid following the fire, coordinated by the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, slowly became institutionalized by the city, resulting in the creation of a variety of boards in the 1870s and 1880s (Skarbek 2014).[8] In the decades that followed, organized charity efforts would play an essential role in the political development of the city (Kusmer 1973; Jentz and Schneirov 2012).

While Chicago would eventually become known as the home to the powerful Daley political machine, early attempts to control the city’s diverse politically active population largely failed (Schneirov 2019). While mayors engaged in a variety of deeply corrupt behavior, fighting *between* those who wished to control public resources meant frequent changes to who held power in the city. Adding in conflicts at the Cook County level and a powerful and large board of elected Aldermen, and Chicago’s local government offered lots of opportunities to try to change politics and policy, most of them dead ends.

Chicago politics—and thus board creation and staffing—were dominated by fights over resources and corruption. Organized groups, including a powerful labor community, would regularly vie for important appointments, viewed as key “for distributing patronage” (Green and Holli 2013, 76). Early boards in Chicago included a powerful Police Board, an appointed Board of Education, and a variety of powerful culturally related boards, including parks, libraries, and the Art Institute. The fractious nature of Chicago politics led to the creation and sunsetting of boards at a rapid rate in the late 1800s.

The presence of specific boards and the rules governing appointments stabilized after the Chicago Charter convention of 1906-1907. The convention, aimed at drafting a home rule charter that would “consolidate Chicago’s fragmented government” (Finegold 1995, 145). All members of the city council, county level elected officials, the library board,

[8] Kathleen McCarthy, the historian of the society, would note that “Most of Chicago’s gilded age millionaires would serve on the board at some point in the careers” (as quoted in Jentz and Schneirov 2012, 49).

the board of education (still appointed), parks boards, and the sanitary board members participated in the convention. One consequence of the charter reform was a designation of a permanent set of appointed boards in the city. Substantial overlap between board members and influential individuals who sat on civic associations was common in Chicago, with many appointed positions—particularly cultural and park boards—seen as a key signal of an individual's social power in the city.

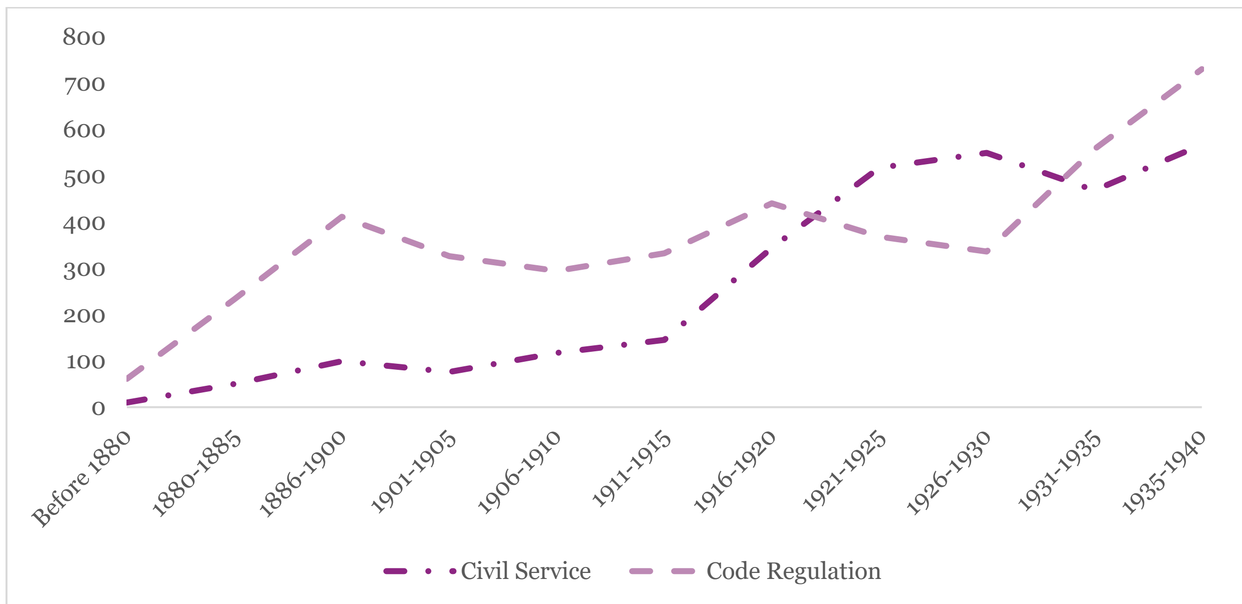
Potential applications

Shifts in urban governance

These data offer insight into the changing priorities and responsibilities of city government during this period. Figure 4 reports on the membership trajectory of two the biggest (in terms of membership) board type in our data: civil service and code regulation. Here we observe two interesting patterns: first, we see that code regulation board membership increasing quickly at the same time that population in our cities is rapidly increasing. This makes sense: as there are more people, there is a bigger demand for cities to control construction and trades. We also see a sharp increase in the 1930s as cities begin to use land use planning as a tool of segregation (Trounstine 2018; Sahn 2024; Holman 2025) and all cities in our dataset create zoning or adjustment boards to outsource controversial decisions about planning to private citizens over elected officials.

We also see a steadier growth, particularly following the onset of the progressive movement, of civic service regulation in our cities. Some of this also relates to demand: as cities expanded their services, they employed growing numbers of civil servants in everything from parks and janitorial to police and fire. The need to manage those employees, establish personnel policies, and decide on priorities increasingly fell to committees charged with overseeing various civil service concerns. But this also echoes broader patterns of influence of the progressive movement, which aimed to "remove political considerations from hiring and firing decisions" (Kuipers and Sahn 2023, 205). Growth is particularly sharp between 1915 and 1930, echoing patterns of civil service reform in a broader set of cities (Kuipers and Sahn 2023).

Figure 4. Civil service and code regulation represent different kinds of demand



We examine these patterns in greater detail in Table 5, where we estimate the number of boards relating to civil service and code regulation (in Models I and II) and the number of appointees on those boards (in Models III and IV). Progressive political administrations are associated with a larger number of boards and appointees to civil service, and fewer code regulation appointees, even when we control for population and a time trend.

Table 5: Machine vs Progressive and Board Creating and Staffing

	Civil Service Boards	Code Regulation Boards	Civil Service Appointees	Code Regulation Appointees
Progressive mayor	0.042**	-0.015	0.046**	-0.020**
	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.004)	(0.005)
100k population	-0.005	0.052**	-0.028**	0.045**
	(0.006)	(0.010)	(0.002)	(0.004)
Time trend	0.002**	-0.003**	0.003**	-0.003**
	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Constant	-0.041+	0.334**	-0.072**	0.331**
	(0.022)	(0.034)	(0.008)	(0.013)
Observations	3738	3738	27720	27720
R^2	0.014	0.011	0.020	0.014

Standard errors in parentheses
+ p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01

Local civic culture and policy creation

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of immense flourishing of civic groups in the United States in general and particularly for women (Skocpol 2003; Evans 1989). The movement of women's organized interests from the private sphere to the public sphere was slow and rooted in deep assumptions about separate spheres for men and women—that is, women were not supposed to spend time or try to influence the public sphere. In the 1800s, the American ideal of Republican Motherhood viewed women's role as limited to imparting moral and ethical character to their husbands and sons; women's absence from the dirty world of politics ensured their ability to do so (Kerber 1976). In the 19th century, women increasingly turned Republican Motherhood on its head: Women's roles as the keeper of moral purity and as family caregiver, activists argued, motivated and indeed required women's engagement with politics (Baker 1984).

Parallel to this were changes in the daily lives of women that facilitated their organization and civic engagement. Into the twentieth century, the shift of household tasks out of the home and the expansion of women's access to education gave growing numbers of women both the time and resources for activities outside of the home (Clemens 1997). Women gathered in social clubs and church organizations which offered opportunities for women to engage in the civic sphere in ways viewed as appropriate to their sex. The scale of participation was impressive and consequential. The General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), founded in 1890, boasted 150,000 "clubwomen" by 1900 and more than a million by the time the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified (Evans 1989).

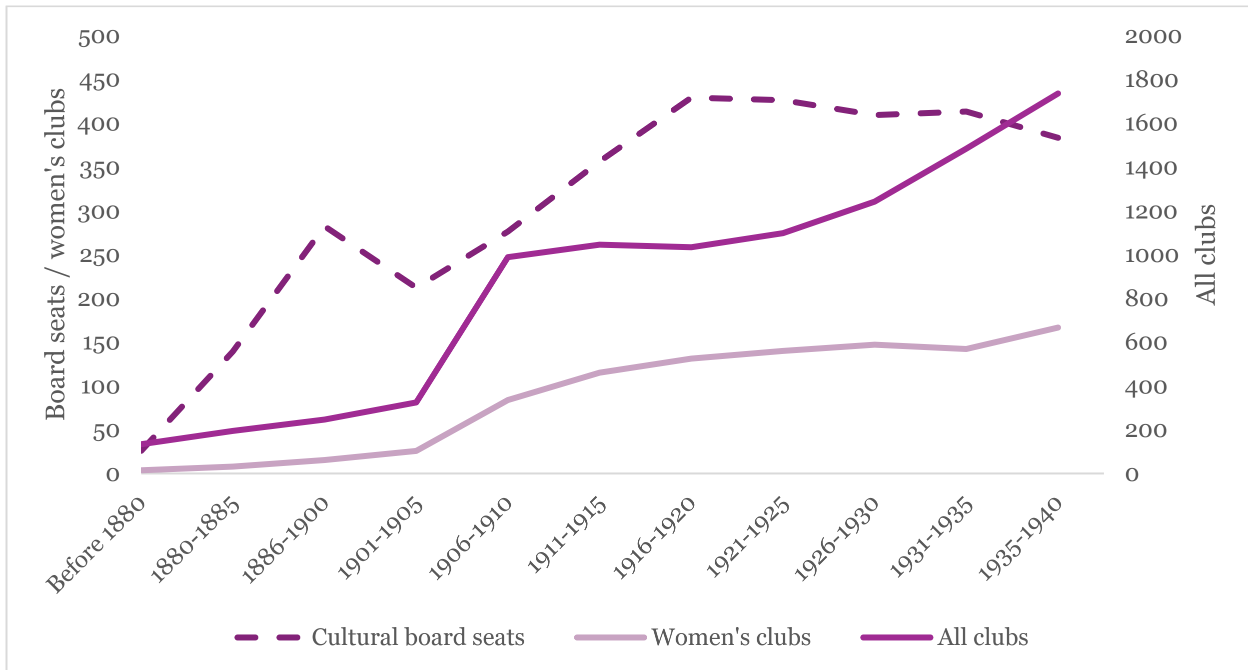
While many women's clubs began as social organizations (gardening or literary clubs, for example), many evolved into civic organizations. As clubwomen sought to establish parks, create libraries, improve the lives of the poor, ward off communicable diseases, and bring an end to prostitution, child labor, and other ills, they often engaged with local leaders, councils, and governments (Holman 2015a). Women were encouraged to engage in "municipal housekeeping" similar to the caregiving they did at home, bringing their natural qualities to questions of public health, children's education, public morality, and child labor (Holman 2015; Morris-Crowther 2004). Women further developed political skills and experience through their activism in Progressive movement causes. Women's activism focused on issues associated with children, education, health, affordable housing, and social services (Holman 2015). Women's organizations specifically worked to increase women's appointments to city boards; for example, the Boston Women's Municipal League targeted appointments as a key tool for women to change local policy (Deutsch 2000) and in Los Angeles, the Friday Morning Club, the premier women's club, had reserved seats on the city's Planning Board.

Civic organizations provided a means for citizens to aggregate their interests and communicate them to urban governments. The dominant narrative has been that informal social organizations formed and then these organizations and their members began lobbying for the institutionalization of these policy areas (Bowden 1930). If this is the case, then we would expect to see, for example, that the creation of culturally-related institutional organizations—those concerned with the arts, libraries, and public spaces—follows periods of intense group activity, for the first time.

To examine this relationship, we create two measures of local activism: the per capita number of all local organizations and of women's organizations. We use city directories to generate a count of all local organizations (including clubs, societies, associations, fraternal organizations, and unions). We also count all women's organizations, which we define as either (1) explicitly women membership (e.g., ladies auxiliary, women's club) or (2) women in leadership positions (such as president, secretary, or treasurer).

Counter to expectations, we find that cultural board creation precedes local organizational growth, including the growth of women's clubs. As Figure 5 shows, the growth of local civic organizations seems to *follow* the membership of cultural boards. As an example, the city of Denver created a wide set of cultural boards including library and arts boards when there were fewer than 150 civic organizations in total and less than five women's organizations.

Figure 5: Cultural board creation pre-dates local civic organizational growth



We again estimate a model for the creation of these cultural boards with population and time controls (see Table 6) and show that the presence of civic organizations or women's civic organizations is not associated with the creation of cultural boards. We replicate these results with a variety of lags and continue to find null effects.

Table 6: Civic Organizing and Cultural Board creation

	Cultural boards
Women's clubs	0.00001
	(0.00026)
Total clubs	-0.00001

	(0.00002)
100k population	0.01460
	(0.01246)
Time trend	-0.00206*
	(0.00105)
Constant	0.25247**
	(0.04629)
Observations	3189
R^2	0.01

Standard errors in parentheses
+ p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01

While we do not see that civic engagement (or women's civic engagement) produced an increase in cultural boards, it is possible that women's activism was more successful in creating policy in areas where cities had long been reluctant or even resistant to policymaking, and where women were particularly active: children, health, and poverty. Here, we condense down the boards in these areas to a single category (although see the appendix for individual issue board memberships across time) we call women's issue boards, and present the membership on these boards as compared to women's civic engagement in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Women's clubs and boards relating to women's issues

As Figure 6 shows, there is a very similar parallel pattern between the membership in these women's issue boards and the rise of women's clubs in our cities. When we

estimate a relationship between these factors, we see (counter to the cultural boards findings) that women's clubs are associated both with the creation of women's issue boards and with the number of appointees to those boards. In comparison, the presence of a Progressive mayor is not, even as "thee national progressive reform policy agenda was directed toward the solution of urban "problems"" (P. J. Ethington 1993, 276).

Table 7: Civic Organizing and Women's Issue Board creation and membership

	Women's issue boards	Women's issue board appointees
Number of women's orgs	0.0014**	0.0018**
	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Progressive mayor	0.0002	-0.0384**
	(0.0143)	(0.0050)
100k population	0.0143	0.0640**
	(0.0128)	(0.0055)
Time trend	-0.0059**	-0.0100**
	(0.0013)	(0.0005)
Constant	0.3792**	0.5423**
	(0.0548)	(0.0218)
Observations	3189	23436
R^2	0.03	0.04

Standard errors in parentheses
+ p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01

Discussion and conclusion

We have introduced a rich new dataset covering urban institutionalization of policymaking in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in four large American cities. As we explore and describe the data, we find wide variation in the policy topics handled via appointed boards in these cities. We use the data to show three key patterns: echoing work by Kuipers and Sahn, (2023), the Progressive movement focused on civil service reform and used appointed boards and commissions as a tool to do so. We also link our data to levels of civic engagement in the broader population and among women and find that, contrary to expectations, civic life did not precede the creation of cultural policy locally. But in comparison, women's civic engagement is associated with the creation of policy around children, health, and poverty in their cities.

The initial analyses we offer here only scratch the surface of the possible applications of these data to key questions about urban political development. For example, future scholars might link these data to policy outcomes at the local level, including who works for cities (Kuipers and Sahn 2023), local municipal spending (Sahn 2023; Carreri, Payson, and Thompson 2023), and segregation and racial inequality (Trounstine 2018; Grumbach, Mickey, and Ziblatt 2024). Researchers might also consider engaging in case studies of the creation, staffing, and work of these boards; for

example, Holman's (2025) evaluation of the role of Los Angeles' Playground board in instituting segregation over public spaces demonstrates the important role that these organizations played in maintaining white supremacy.

The staffing of these boards also points to a myriad of additional possibilities for research. In our own work, we are particularly interested in when and where women got access to these forms of power. Were their appointments concentrated on the women's issue boards that we discuss? And what role does something like the implementation of women's suffrage have on their appointment to these boards? Researchers might also apply work on the political incorporation of immigrants to these data to see when and how groups get access to governing powers.

Specific data available for some, if not all, of our cities could deepen our understanding of local political power. The Denver member data, for example, include information on members' addresses, occupations, and employers, as well as data on other positions in the city, opening up the possibility of mapping networks of power and connection in a city as it dramatically expands. Indeed, the address data means that members can be quite literally mapped, providing further insight into the geographies of political access and power.

Rapid urbanization at the turn of the last century transformed the United States. Contestation between machines and progressives over the form of government and the content of public policy established practices and institutions that continue to shape cities today. The Governing the Gilded Age board datasets offer an opportunity to deepen and complicate our understanding of this key period in urban political development.

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Appendix

Table A1: Membership on boards relating to children, health, and poverty