



# Metropolitan Governance in America

ROUTLEDGE

DONALD F. NORRIS

# METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE IN AMERICA

*For Cheryl  
With all my love*

*In Memory of  
Don Phares*

# Metropolitan Governance in America

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# Preface

This book is the culmination of a very long journey that began in the late 1960s at the University of Virginia. It was then that I took a course on urban politics as part of my graduate studies in political science in the Woodrow Wilson Department of Government and Politics at UVA.<sup>1</sup> There, for the first time, I was exposed to the writings of the Metro Reformers and their calls for serious governmental reform in America's metropolitan areas to deal with suburban sprawl, governmental fragmentation and the negative externalities of both that were affecting those areas and their residents throughout the nation. Naively, and more or less uncritically, I accepted the Metro Reformers' writings at face value and wondered why in the world the governments and residents of our metropolitan areas were refusing to heed the Metro Reformers' warnings and recommendations.

Had I only paid more attention when I was growing up in a rural town a few miles east of Rochester, New York, in the 1940s and 1950s, I might have known the answer. It turns out that my parents and our neighbors were part of the problem. In 1946, Charles Norris (a Second World War Veteran) and his wife Nina (and I), moved into a rented apartment in a house owned by a local farmer on Drum Road in the Town of Webster<sup>2</sup> for a short stay while waiting for their house on Klem Road, a mile or so away, to be built. The house, into which they (and I) moved in 1947, was on 30 acres of what had been a farm that was bounded by Klem Road to the south, the tracks of a spur line of the New York Central Railroad to the north, Van Alstyne Road to the east, and the Hembrook farm (around 50 acres) to the west. Except for their small, one-story, two-bedroom, one-bath house and a small barn behind it, there were no other structures on their land.

In the late 1940s, the Town of Webster was almost exclusively rural, with numerous fruit orchards, farms and dairies, the small, incorporated Village of Webster and the even smaller unincorporated hamlet of West Webster. In 1940, the Town population (including the Village) was 5,250 souls. By 1950, although the population had risen by more than one-third (36.6 percent) to 7,174, Webster remained mostly rural. Within a short time, however, Webster's rural character began giving way to that of a burgeoning bedroom suburb of Rochester.

My parents helped facilitate this transition by subdividing a sizeable portion of their 30 acres and selling individual building lots of an acre or two, which were nearly all snapped up by the mid-1950s, mainly by families moving out of Rochester. These newcomers to Webster wanted green spaces, good schools and

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1 Now the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics.

2 Counties in New York State are divided into Towns (aka, Townships in other states). Monroe County, NY, in which Webster is located, has 20 towns, the city of Rochester and several incorporated villages.

safe neighborhoods for their kids and themselves and, of course, lower taxes. They also wanted nothing more to do with the problems of the city that they had just left. Between 1950 and 1960, Webster's population more than doubled (129 percent growth), ballooning to 16,434, and the Town was having difficulty keeping up with the demand for public services, especially schools.

In subsequent decades, the Town's population continued to grow with farm after farm and orchard after orchard growing houses instead of fruit and vegetables. By 2010, the Town population was 42,641, a six-fold increase (494 percent) over 1950.<sup>3</sup> Webster's transformation, of course, was replicated throughout urban America during the decades following the Second World War.

A few years after completing graduate studies and still enamored of the Metro Reformers, I served as a consultant to a local television station in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the production of a six-part documentary "At Issue: Metro Consolidation."<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the documentary repeated many of the Metro Reformers' warnings and recommendations. Later, I led an effort through a business organization in Grand Rapids to secure an amendment to the Michigan state constitution that would permit county home rule. After three years of getting nowhere and in the face of opposition from just about every political source in the state, we gave up. Nevertheless, and even with this dose of political reality, I continued to wonder why, if things were as bad as the reformers said, local governments and their residents did not embrace reform. Clearly, the lessons that I should have learned in Webster continued to elude me.

Owing to changes in my career trajectory, I moved away from urban studies for a number of years, returning to the field in the late 1980s. As I began reacquainting myself with the issue of metropolitan governance, I came across the early works of the New Regionalists. Their argument, upon which I will elaborate in greater detail in Chapter 4, is that local governments in metro areas are impelled by forces beyond their control to cooperate with one another in order for their regions to be economically competitive in the global economy. I was then, and to this day remain, skeptical of this line of argument, but still I wondered if there was any truth to this argument, why did local governments not seem to be any more cooperative with one another than they were prior to the arrival of the New Regionalists?

As I continued reading and re-reading works on metropolitan governance, I began to think about research questions on this subject and also about ways in which I could contribute to this field of scholarship. As a result, since the early 1990s, I have conducted considerable research into and have written a number of journal articles, book chapters and conference papers about metropolitan governance, both in general and also tied to specific locations—the Baltimore, Maryland region, two conurbations in England and a comparison of metro governance in the US and Poland.

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3 Even today, Webster is Rochester's fastest growing suburb. See: <http://www.mapquest.com/us/ny/webster>. Accessed December 20, 2014.

4 I moved to Grand Rapids in 1970 where I took my first academic position after completing graduate school.

Ultimately, my journey led to the writing of this book, although the book was also the beneficiary of a bit of serendipity. My colleague, friend and co-conspirator on several works on this subject, Don Phares, and I proposed a paper on metro governance for the 2009 European Urban Research Association (EURA) conference in Madrid. The paper was accepted, but, due to the Great Recession and university budget cuts, we were unable to attend the conference. Here is where serendipity comes in. Owing to the timing of budget cuts at our universities, we withdrew rather late from the conference—too late for our names and the title of our proposed paper to be removed from the program. Valerie Rose of Ashgate Publishing saw our entry in the program and emailed asking if we might be interested in writing a book on this subject for Ashgate to publish. Don and I submitted a proposal for the book, and, in the summer of 2010 we signed a contract to write it. After a number of twists and turns, and, sadly, after Don Phares had to withdraw from co-authoring because of health issues, I am pleased to say that it is finished.<sup>5</sup>

A long journey indeed. Moreover, as readers will note, the callow, naive and uncritical believer in Metro Reform has (he believes!) matured and has become a more skeptical consumer of writings that advocate metropolitan reform and governance. Read on and you will see.

Before moving on to the substance of the book, however, I want to thank several persons who assisted along the way. First and foremost, I want to thank Don Phares for our long collaboration on the subject of metropolitan governance. Together, Don and I engaged in close to a gazillion discussions about metro governance, sat on nearly as many panels at conferences, and wrote two book chapters and three conference papers on metro governance, all of which, in one way or another, fed into the writing of the book.<sup>6</sup>

Second, over the gestation period of the book and other works that I wrote on metropolitan government that preceded it, I have been assisted by five graduate research assistants from UMBC School of Public Policy, without whose efforts this project undoubtedly would have taken much longer and would not be nearly as good. So, thank you Aynur Saygun, Gretchen Shaub, Nicole Stewart and Tonya Zimmerman, especially for your labors in the vineyard of literature review. I am very grateful for all of your fine work. I also want to thank Lukas Glos for painstakingly reviewing the final manuscript to make sure that all citations and references were correct and that all direct quotations were accurate. Finally, let me thank Val Rose for suggesting this book and for so graciously weathering delays along the path of its writing. What we thought at the time would be a two-year effort has taken four and a half. But, here it is!

Donald F. Norris  
Columbia, Maryland

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5 More sadly, still, my dear friend Don Phares passed away in June of 2015, just months before the publication of this book. Because of our many discussions on the topic of metropolitan governance, I know that Don would agree with the contents and conclusions of this book. His memory lives on in its pages.

6 I also co-authored chapters that appeared in two books on metro governance that Don edited.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The United States is, for better or worse, awash in governments, local governments especially—89,004 of them in 2012 to be more or less precise (Census Bureau, 2012). Of these, 3,031 are counties, 19,522 are municipalities (cities, towns, villages and the like), 16,364 are townships (mainly in New England and the Midwest), 37,203 are special purpose governments (aka, special districts), and 12,884 are independent school districts. The nation also has 381 metropolitan areas (aka, metropolitan *statistical* areas, metro areas or MSAs).<sup>1</sup>

The federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines a metropolitan area as a geographic territory that has an urban core with a population of at least 50,000, plus a surrounding territory that is socially and economically integrated with the central core. MSAs are statistical artifacts and have no standing in law, but are nevertheless important for an understanding of a wide variety of problems and issues in the nation's urbanized areas.

For the most part, the governance of US metro areas is highly fragmented, with numerous local governments of various types co-existing within them. Local governments' boundaries often overlap one another, especially special purpose governments whose boundaries overlap those of general-purpose governments. Local governments in metro areas often duplicate one another, in that many of them provide the same or very similar services but in smaller sub-areas of the larger metropolitan area. And, as I noted above, there are many, many local governments in the typical metro area.

Why is metropolitan governance important, and why should it be the subject of yet another book? It is important, first, because a significant proportion of our population, about 84 percent, lives in metro areas. Second, this population concentration means that it is in metro areas where we observe the largest number of and often the most intractable *urban* problems and issues, which, for decades, scholars and activists have examined and railed more or less unsuccessfully against. These are problems that flow primarily from the negative externalities of uncontrolled growth and development in metro areas and the suburban sprawl and governmental fragmentation that such growth and development beget. In the chapters that follow, I will touch on these problems, at least insofar as they have been identified in more than 85 years of study of the problems of American metropolitan areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the book I use the terms metropolitan area, metro area and region synonymously.

My main purpose in this book, however, is not to dissect the problems of metro areas, but, instead, it is to address the question of whether metropolitan governance exists in the US. If so, under what circumstances it does it exist, and, if not, why, and then whether is it even possible to argue that metropolitan governance is likely to develop. This, in turn, is important because, since at least 1930, scholars, advocates and other observers have been calling for significant governmental reform in metropolitan areas and for the development of metropolitan governance to address the negative externalities caused by uncontrolled growth, sprawl and fragmentation.

In this chapter, I begin my examination of metropolitan governance with a definition of the term itself. I do so, in part, because few, if any, other works on this subject explicitly define metropolitan governance. Instead, many such works either assume that everyone “knows it when they see it” or allow a very broad understanding of the term—so broad that virtually anything (for example, the most limited acts of intergovernmental cooperation) is often viewed as governance.

To me, governance means something more than cooperation, and metropolitan governance means governance across an entire region. I define this term as:

The formal association of governments, non-governmental organizations and/or residents in a metropolitan area for the purpose of controlling or regulating behavior and/or performing functions or services within the metropolitan area. Governance is areawide, governing decisions are binding, and participants can be compelled to comply with them. (This expands on the definition in Norris, 2001.)

This definition is consistent with both standard dictionary definitions and the traditional understanding of governance that comes from the discipline of political science—governance as regulation and control.

*Webster’s Dictionary* (1987: p. 529) defines *governance* as *government*, and it defines the latter as “the act or process of governing; specifically, authoritative direction and control.” It defines the verb *to govern* as “to exercise continuous sovereign authority,” and “to control and direct the making and administration of policy,” among other things. To govern also means “holding in check” and “restraining” (presumably behavior).

Noted political scientist David Easton (1965) argued that one of the principal functions of a political system is “... the authoritative allocation of values for society.” Easton’s concept of authoritative allocation means two fundamentally important things. First, decisions flow from proper authority and, therefore, are legitimate (*authoritative*). Second, they are binding on all participants (the entire society) and must be obeyed. Anything less and decisions are meaningless because they do not affect all members of a society and have no teeth and cannot be enforced.

I contrast metropolitan governance with metropolitan cooperation and define the latter term as:

The voluntary association of governments, non-governmental organizations and/or residents within a metropolitan area for purposes of addressing issues of mutual concern and/or performing functions and services. Cooperation may be areawide or may involve territory less than areawide. Cooperation may involve as few as two organizations or as many as all of the organizations in the area. Cooperation may involve one issue, function or service or many. Because cooperation is voluntary, decisions taken are not authoritative, and participants cannot be compelled to comply with them. (This expands on the definition in Norris 2001).

According to *Webster's*, cooperation means: “1) to act or work with one another or others; work together: 2) associate with one another or others for mutual benefit” (288). Thus, cooperation is not governance. As I will explain later, cooperation is no doubt better than conflict, but it cannot substitute for governance for it lacks the ability to compel compliance with decisions mutually taken.

The reality of metropolitan politics is that, while governments in these areas do, in fact, cooperate with one another around a number of services, functions and issues, they are loath to surrender any of their presumed autonomy in order to address the really tough, controversial issues that flow from the negative externalities of growth, sprawl and fragmentation. Thus, these areawide issues are rarely confronted in meaningful ways. The unwillingness of local governments to coalesce and address these problems produces very uneven patterns of metropolitan development, with some territories flourishing and others languishing. With some exceptions, newer and more distant suburbs are doing well while central cities and older, near-in suburbs are doing relatively poorly by nearly every measure.

I urge the reader to bear my definitions of governance and cooperation in mind as she or he reads on. To assist that reading, let me briefly outline the structure of the book that follows.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the works of the Metro Reformers—specifically 18 works by scholars, advocates and advocacy organizations, and the long since defunct US Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. These works are notable for at least four reasons. First, the identification of problems associated with the fragmented nature of government and the uncontrolled growth occurring in metropolitan areas. Second, the identification of negative externalities flowing from these problems. Third, the (mainly, although not exclusively) structural reforms recommended to address the negative externalities. Fourth, the extraordinary degree of consistency among the authors of these works about the problems of fragmentation and sprawl, the negative externalities that they produce and the range of solutions available to address them. It is also noteworthy that most of these works lacked the empirical evidence that modern scholars might

require before making such wide ranging and substantial recommendations for governmental change.

Chapter 3 is my critical assessment of yet another school of thought around the subject of metro governance. This school, however, holds a position that is diametrically the opposite of the Metro Reformers and the New Regionalists. The Public Choice School argues that the sprawling, fragmented metro area is fine just as it is because it acts as a quasi-market mechanism in which the local governments in a metropolitan area, acting in a manner similar to that of firms competing in the marketplace. Here, local governments offer distinct packages of goods or services to prospective consumers (or citizens). This, in turn, provides those customers with the unfettered opportunity to make choices among many different residential locations and to select the one that best meets their personal preferences. As such, there is no need for regional anything—governance or cooperation.

In this chapter, I examine what is undoubtedly the single most influential work in the history of this school—Charles Tiebout's (1956) theoretical model of the behavior of local governments and citizens in metropolitan areas. I do so to understand the model's assumptions because they provide the very foundation of the school. If the model's assumptions are not empirically correct (that is, if they do not present an accurate view of how local governments and residents of metropolitan areas actually behave), the model itself will fail. In my analysis of the model, I also employ the works of a number of scholars who have preceded me in critically examining this model.

In Chapter 4, I address the New Regionalism, and I do so in much the same way I addressed the Metro Reformers in Chapter 2. That is, through the principal works of scholars in this school. Here, however, I am particularly interested in the assumptions and arguments underlying these works insofar as they either provided a solid foundation for the claims made by New Regionalist writers or they did not. For example, can voluntary cooperation be an effective substitute for governmental structures? Do local governments in American regions, in fact, compete in the global economy? For reasons of economic survival, are they, therefore, impelled to cooperate with one another to address the negative externalities identified in both the Metro Reform and New Regionalist literature? Or, does politics trump economics, preventing these governments from cooperating except on the margins? And, last, are suburbs dependent on their (often declining) central cities for their own (the suburbs') economic success, and, if so, will suburban governments be more likely to cooperate with their central cities for the sake of the economic survival of the overall region in the global economy? I also examine case studies of metro governance both in the US and abroad to broaden my study of the New Regionalism and to ask if metro governance as proposed by the New Regionalists exists anywhere.

Next, in Chapter 5, I report the findings of a survey that I conducted among the Councils of Government in the nation's largest 102 metropolitan areas. In this survey, I asked a number of questions about metropolitan governance and cooperation. It will come as little surprise to readers that I found a considerable