

**Governing the Gilded Age City:
Local Institution Building in the United States in the late 1800s and early
1900s**

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How did urban political leaders respond to the tumult of the late 1800s and early 1900s in the United States? Dramatic population growth, immigration, economic instability, inequality, and industrialization created new policy demands that pushed local governments to expand their capacity. One tool for such capacity expansion was the creation and staffing of local appointed boards and commissions. 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 1940s. Supplementing these data with measures of local organizational life and political machine versus Progressive control of local politics, these data permit scholars to trace the effectiveness of local political movements, the fluctuation of policy agendas over time, trends in representation and power, and the long-term consequences of temporary political disputes.

Keywords: American Political Development, urban, political machines, Progressive movement, boards and commissions, civic engagement, political institutions.

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Introduction

The turn of the last century (late 1800s to the mid-1900s) was a period of dramatic transformation in the United States, with much of this change focused on urban areas. Explosive population growth, industrialization, immigration, economic instability, 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 one response to this unstable context, the creation, staffing, and empowering of appointed boards and commissions. These local political institutions offer a mechanism for understanding the development and growth of urban policy making, as well as how cities evolved, and the persistence of political institutions.

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 1940s. We further place appointed boards within the context 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. To this end, we include measures of local organizational life, political control, and economic conditions, as well as deep case studies to provide a nuanced understanding of the political context in each of the cities. In total, our dataset covers more than 4,000 boards and 30,000 board members across the four cities.

We demonstrate the potential uses of this new database by investigating two questions of interest. First, we examine the impact of political regimes—machine versus Progressive—on the development of specific types of boards. Cities in the late 1800s and early 1900s were characterized by extensive political conflict, particularly over 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). Combining our boards data with information on the presence of Progressive and machine political leaders, we show how Progressives were successful in implementing civil service reforms in their cities in the form of oversight boards.

Second, we examine the ways that local organizational capacity translated into policy via boards. This period is characterized by a dramatic increase in civic engagement in cities, with the rise of the growth of labor unions, and broadening of local organizational life (Gamm 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 shift of women into public life, focused

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

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 key impetus for broadening the scope of local government. We collect new data on the presence of such clubs over several decades, and particularly the presence of women's organizations. Combining this with our boards data, we show that, counter to dominant narratives, clubs and societies did not drive cultural policymaking through the creation of such boards and commissions.

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 Gilded Age cities

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, 1880-1950

	US overall		Our case studies				
	% urban pop	Urban pop (millions)	Boston	Chicago	Denver	Los Angeles	All four cities
1880	26%	14.1	362,839	503,185	35,629	11,183	912,836
1890	28%	22.1	448,477	1,099,850	106,713	50,395	1,705,435
1900	40%	30.2	560,892	1,698,575	133,859	102,479	2,495,805
1910	46%	42.0	670,585	2,185,283	213,381	319,198	3,388,447
1920	51%	54.2	748,060	2,701,705	256,491	576,673	4,282,929
1930	56%	69.0	781,188	3,376,438	287,861	1,238,048	5,683,535
1940	57%	74.7	770,816	3,396,808	322,412	1,504,277	5,994,313
1950	64%	95.9	801,444	3,620,962	415,786	1,970,358	6,808,550
Ratio 1950: 1880		6.80	2.21	7.20	11.67	176.19	7.46
Annual growth rate		2.8%	1.1%	2.9%	3.6%	7.7%	2.9%

Source: U.S. Census.

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.

City boards

Boards had been part of town governance from the early days of the United States but were far less formal and permanent than they came to be. In Colonial America, political elites eschewed cities for a mostly rural and agrarian lifestyle (Ethington and Levitus 2009). A small 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, growing cities increasingly turned to 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; Reys 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.

Political machines

Political machines emerged in many US cities in the mid- and late-1800s, controlling politics in some cities for the next century or more (Trounstine 2008). Made possible by the growth of cities, inflows of immigrant populations, and increased demands for services, these party organizations recruited voter support by supplying material incentives like jobs, access to government policies, or government contracts. Political machines consolidated competing political factions under a single umbrella of centralized power (Arnold 2013).

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 response to corruption, associated rising costs of city governance, and general discomfort with the power that immigrants wielded in political machines, the Progressive movement sought to control local politics in the United States (Sahn 2023). 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 of 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).

Progressives 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 (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 struggle between Progressives and political machines shaped the form and function of cities that persists into the modern day (Erie 1992; Stone 1996; Trounstein 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.

Civic organizations and women's activism

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's place was in the home and not the public sphere. Since the Founding, 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 nineteenth 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).

At the same time, changes in the daily lives of women 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 in 1920 (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 caregiving and purity 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, such as children, education, health, affordable housing, and social services (Holman 2015). Many of these issues were the purview of both new and long-established local boards and commissions. 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.

Historic board databases

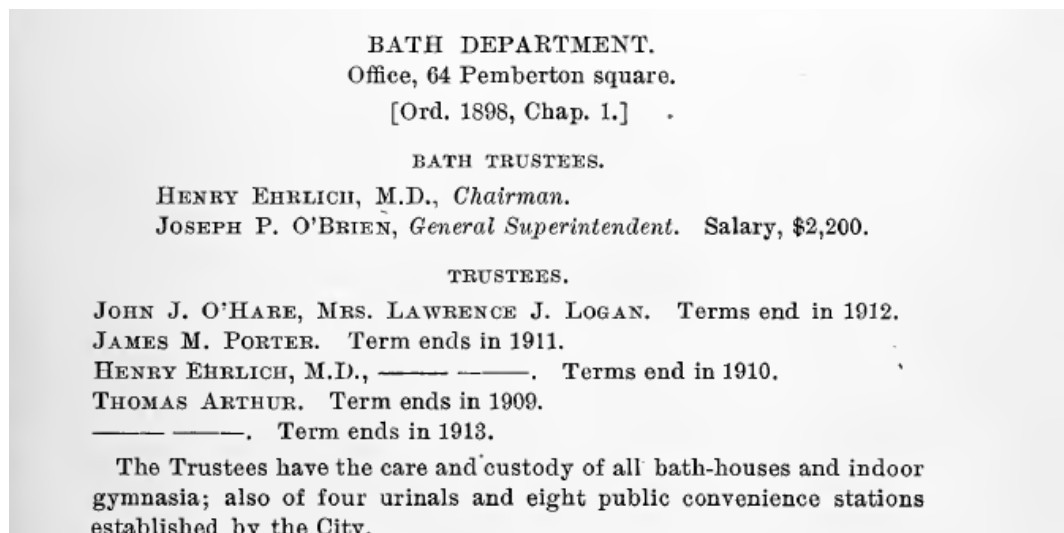
We introduce two interrelated datasets for public use: First, we provide a **board dataset**, which includes a variety of information about the remit of the board, who nominates members, how many members, and how this information varies by years and when the board first appears in official records. Second, 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.

Our data collection strategy focused on major cities for which board and board membership data are available in various archives and documents. Today, most American cities make information about the current membership of their local boards and commissions available on their public websites. Such record-keeping was simply not a priority for over-burdened and under-resourced city governments in the past. We collect and code information about which boards exist and who sits on all appointed boards in Boston, Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles, from the earliest data available to the 1930s from the following sources.

The sources for these data vary. 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



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. 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 2: 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.

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. 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 Emanuel and he lived at 733 8th Ave.

Figure 3: 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

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.

Figure 4: 1880 Board of Health Commissioners in Los Angeles



Member	Appointed	Completed
Bliss, O. H.	December 23, 1880	December 10, 1881
Mascarel, Jose	December 23, 1880	December 10, 1881
Monroe, William Norton	December 23, 1880	December 10, 1881
City Health Officer Dr. Winston, James Brown	December 11, 1880	December 10, 1881
Board of Public Works Commissioners		
Bower, J. G.	December 23, 1880	December 10, 1881
Gephard, George	December 23, 1880	December 10, 1881
Kuhrts, Jacob	December 23, 1880	December 10, 1881

Table 2 indicates the number of total boards in each city during our analysis time frame, 1880 to 1945. 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.

Table 2. Governing the Gilded Age City Board Dataset

City	years covered	total number of boards	total board members
Boston	1901-1930; 1932; 1935; 1938; 1941; 1943	997	4,612
Chicago	1888; 1889; 1892; 1900; 1903; 1907; 1908; 1911; 1913-1930; 1932-1937	552	3,192
Denver	1880-1882; 1884-1894; 1896; 1899; 1900; 1905; 1907; 1911; 1915; 1920; 1923	550	3,225
Los Angeles	1880-1945	2,061	19,836

Table 2 also summarizes the scope of the board membership dataset. Across four cities, the GGAC member dataset includes information on more than 30,000 board members. The dataset includes the full name of every member, permitting us to estimate member gender. We have 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.

The evolution of boards followed very different paths across the four cities. By 1900, both Boston and Denver had more than 30 boards, while Chicago and Los Angeles had approximately 20 boards each. In subsequent years, however, Boston and Denver show a slight decline in the number of boards, while Chicago shows steady growth and Los Angeles experienced very fast growth in the number of boards. The patterns of growth in board membership resemble that of the boards. Appendix Figure A1 shows this growth in per capita terms: Both Boston and Chicago have much lower levels of boards and board membership per capita than the faster-growing cities of Denver and Los Angeles, and they

also show much smaller growth over time. Interestingly, Los Angeles’s fast growth in boards is far outstripped by its population growth, so that board membership per capita declines over time. In order to add further context, short narrative political histories for each of our case studies can be found in Appendix B.

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, drawn from previous work on city boards (Holman 2025). As Table 3 below shows, the most prevalent boards were those related to civil service, code regulation, culture, economic development, fire and police, and planning; each of these categories accounts for more than 10% of board members in our sample.

Table 3. Governing the Gilded Age City Board Remits

Remit area	Explanation	Example	# board-years	% of board-years	% of members
Children and education	schools, delinquency, orphans	Schoolhouse department	230	5.5%	4.9%
Civil rights	immigration, women’s status, and disabilities	Immigration and statistics	32	0.8%	0.4%
Civil service	pensions, hiring, and regulation of public employees	Board of civil service commissioners	392	9.4%	10.8%
Code regulation	code enforcement and regulation of trades	Wool and wool growing	833	20.0%	15.6%
Culture	arts, music, museums, and library	The art institute of Chicago	462	11.1%	11.4%

Economic development	tax incentives, economic development, and tourism	Boston metropolitan district	417	10.0%	9.5%
Environment	animal control, agriculture, trees, and air and water quality	Board of water commissioners	240	5.8%	7.0%
Elections	regulation of public officials, city employees, and elections	Election commissioners	136	3.3%	1.4%
Fire and Police	public safety	Fire commissioners	398	9.6%	11.4%
Health	public health and infectious diseases	Consumptives hospital trustees	265	6.4%	4.0%
Infrastructure	public works, ports, bridges, and roads	Transit commission	307	7.4%	5.8%
Judicial	judges, criminal enforcement, and sentencing	Board of motion picture censors	105	2.5%	1.9%
Parks and recreation	parks, pools, sports, and recreation activities	Playground commissioners	298	7.2%	7.6%
Planning	zoning and design review	Area planning commission	313	7.5%	10.6%
Poverty and poor people	social services and welfare policies	Overseers of the poor	188	4.5%	5.2%
Taxes and budgeting	income tax regulation, budget oversight, and municipal borrowing	Chicago tax commission	331	8.0%	7.3%

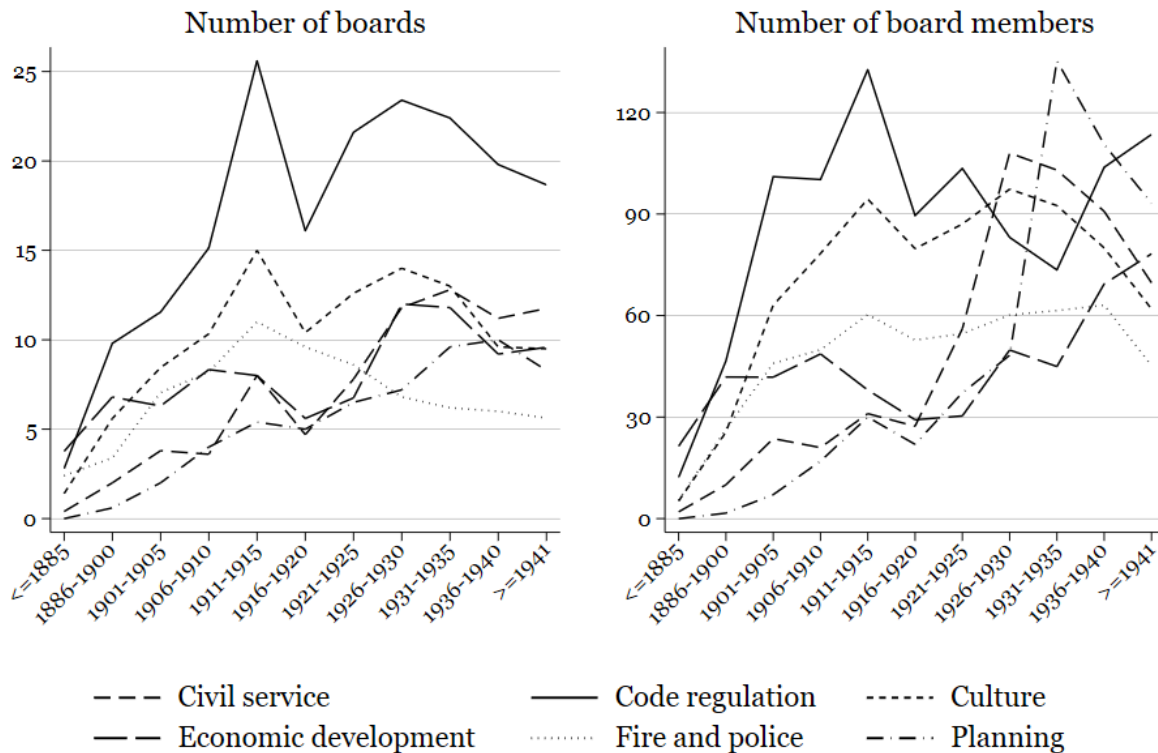
Note: Percentages reflect the fraction of boards whose remit belongs in a specific issue area. Percentages add up to more than 100% because approximately 12% of boards in our database have remits that reflect multiple issue areas.

These data offer insight into the changing priorities and responsibilities of city government during this period. Figure 6 reports on the trajectory of the six most common types of boards in our database. We see a sharp rise in the number of code regulation boards until 1905, as the 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. The trend in code regulation boards then stabilizes before another increase in the 1930s as cities begin to use land use planning as a tool of segregation (Trounstine 2018; Sahn 2024; Holman 2025); all cities in our dataset create zoning or adjustment boards to outsource controversial decisions about planning to private citizens over elected officials. Interestingly, the creation and staffing of culture boards as well as fire and police boards also follows a similar pattern of a rising trend until 1905, followed by stabilization. Unlike code regulation, culture boards and fire and police boards do not show any increase in the 1930s.

In contrast, boards related to civil service regulation, economic development and planning show a sharp increase only after 1906, and a small decline after 1930. Some of the increase in civil service boards is a natural consequence of the earlier increase in the number of boards: 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. Some of may also reflect broader patterns of influence of the Progressive movement, which aimed to “remove political considerations from hiring and firing decisions,” and the enactment of civil service reforms in several cities (Kuipers and Sahn 2023).

Figure 6: Number of boards by remit type



Disaggregating these patterns by city shows somewhat similar trends across all four cities: code regulation, fire and police, and culture boards showed increases in earlier years, while civil service, economic development and planning boards became more prominent in later years (see Appendix Figure A2).

City regime type

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, such as 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 Boston, 25% in Chicago, 30% in Denver and 38% in Los Angeles.

Civic organizations

We construct two measures of civic organizations in each city. Similar to Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2004), we use city directories to generate a count of all local organizations, including clubs, societies, associations, fraternal organizations, and unions. 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 or women's club), or list women in top leadership positions such as president, secretary, or treasurer. We interpolate these values to years between the decades.

Applications

Both the political regime and the organizational capacity of cities vary across 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.

Does Regime Type Shape Board Creation and Staffing?

We examine whether Progressive political administrations were more likely to expand the number of boards and board membership, as compared to machine-

dominated administrations. We expect that Progressive administrations created and expanded boards as a means to shift power away from machines, encourage citizen participation in policy-making, and disconnect policy-making and implementation from electoral politics. We also expect that Progressive governments would prioritize the creation and growth of particular kinds of boards, such as those associated with political reform, good government, and social services relative to machine governments.

As an initial investigation, we regress the number of boards or the number of board members (dependent variables) on a binary variable indicating a Progressive administration, controlling for city population and a linear time trend. We find that Progressive mayors have seven more boards and 126 more board members, on average, compared to machine mayors; this difference is statistically significant (Table 4, columns 1 and 4). Consistent with our expectations, Progressive administrations are associated with a growth in public boards and commissions in general.

Table 4: Political Organization and Board Creation and Staffing

	# boards			# board members		
	(1) Total	(2) Civil Service	(3) Code Regulation	(4) Total	(5) Civil Service	(6) Code Regulation
Progressive mayor	7.323** (1.431)	1.883** (0.391)	0.581 (0.520)	125.970* (20.874)	24.375** (4.200)	14.741** (4.499)
100k population	- 0.608** (0.070)	-0.074** (0.016)	-0.036* (0.016)	-4.763** (0.939)	-0.825** (0.179)	-0.337* (0.136)
Time trend	0.579** (0.057)	0.092** (0.015)	0.073** (0.016)	4.450** (0.638)	0.766** (0.132)	0.443** (0.123)
Constant	10.962** (1.464)	-0.357 (0.247)	3.117** (0.651)	39.890** (11.237)	-5.806** (1.977)	13.376** (4.404)

Mean of dep var	26.2	2.5	5.3	171.7	5.2	27.3
Observations	156	156	156	156	156	156
R^2	0.62	0.46	0.16	0.51	0.45	0.21

Standard errors in parentheses

+ p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01

We also expect Progressive administrations were more likely to create reform-oriented boards rather than other kinds. To test this, we examine the presence of civil service boards; Progressives sought to make government employment dependent on qualifications and experience as a means to undermine a key form of machine patronage, and thus were particularly interested in civil service systems. As a check, we also look at the creation and expansion of boards concerned with code regulation. Control over city code was another important strategy of political machines, and thus we would not expect to see their growth under Progressive regimes. As expected, we find that Progressive governments are associated with a statistically significant increase in the number of civil service boards (column 2), but not with the number of code regulation boards (column 3). Indeed, the increase in civil service boards accounts for more than a quarter of the overall increase in boards under Progressive administrations. There is a positive relationship between Progressive mayors and the number of members of both civil service boards and code regulation boards (columns 5 and 6), though the increase in civil service board membership is greater, consistent with the increase in the number of such boards.

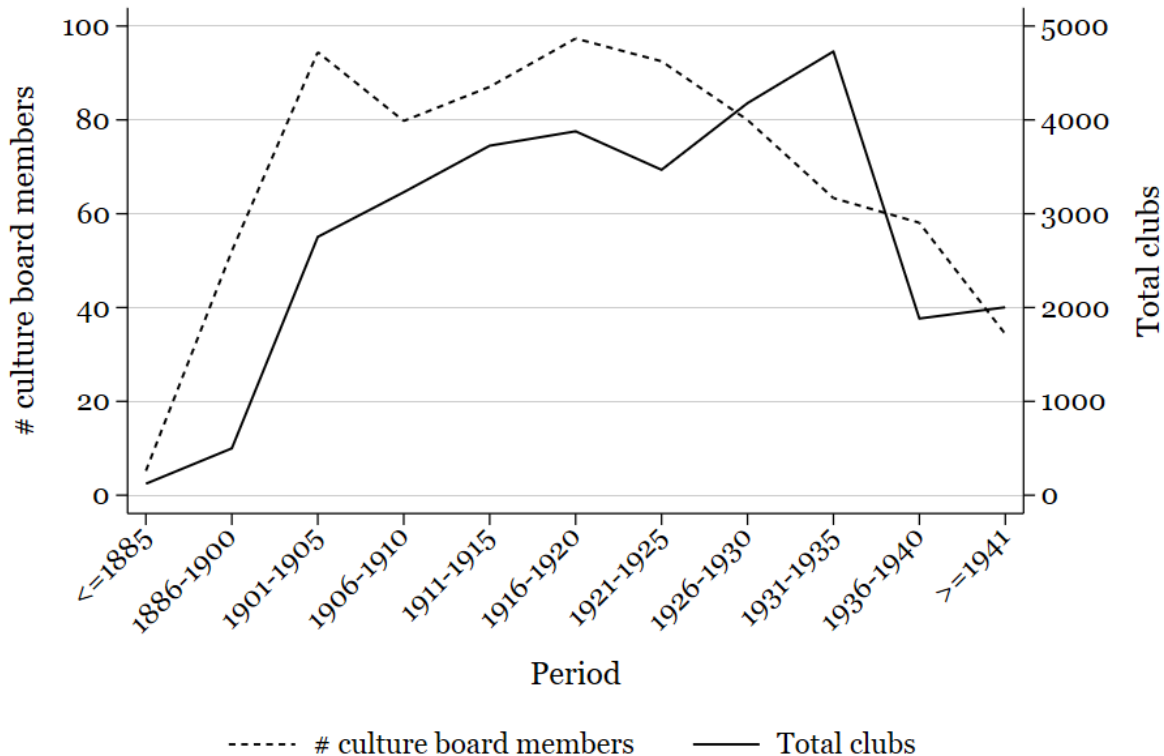
Does Local Activism Shape the Creation and Staffing of Boards?

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, when first created.

Counter to expectations, we find that cultural board creation precedes local organizational growth, including the growth of women’s clubs. As Figure 7 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 7: Cultural board creation pre-dates local civic organizational growth



To examine the relationship more formally, we regress the number of culture boards or culture board members on the total number of civic organizations (clubs) in the city, as well as on the number of women’s clubs, controlling for population and linear time trends. We find that the greater presence of civic organizations in the city is not associated with the creation of culture boards, and is associated with a slightly lower membership of those boards (Table 5, columns 1 and 4). Controlling for the total number of boards/board members (columns 2 and 5) and the presence of a Progressive mayor (columns 3 and 6) does not change this conclusion. The number of women’s clubs is not associated with more culture board creation, but is significantly associated with increased membership in those boards, suggesting that these boards may be drawing on the women’s clubs to expand membership.

Table 5: Civic Organizing and Culture Board creation

	# culture boards			# culture board members		
No. of clubs	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.011** (0.002)	-0.006* (0.003)	-0.008** (0.003)
Women's clubs	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.141** (0.038)	0.091* (0.036)	0.116** (0.038)
100k population	-0.021 (0.019)	0.003 (0.015)	-0.019 (0.020)	0.171 (0.176)	0.411** (0.147)	0.227 (0.181)
Time trend	-0.014 (0.019)	-0.028+ (0.014)	-0.017 (0.019)	-0.088 (0.122)	-0.321** (0.116)	-0.173 (0.114)
Total boards		0.077** (0.013)				
Progressive mayor			0.318			8.539**

			(0.242)			(2.761)
Total board members					0.054**	(0.009)
Constant	3.928**	2.388**	3.879**	22.589**	17.872**	21.269**
	(0.392)	(0.421)	(0.389)	(3.402)	(2.529)	(2.932)
Observations	118	118	118	118	118	118
R^2	0.09	0.38	0.11	0.09	0.41	0.21

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 demonstrate two 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.

The initial analyses we offer here scratch just 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 of our cities could deepen our understanding of local political power. The Denver directory, for example, includes 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 A: Descriptive Trends by City

Figure A1: Growth of boards and board membership per 1000 population

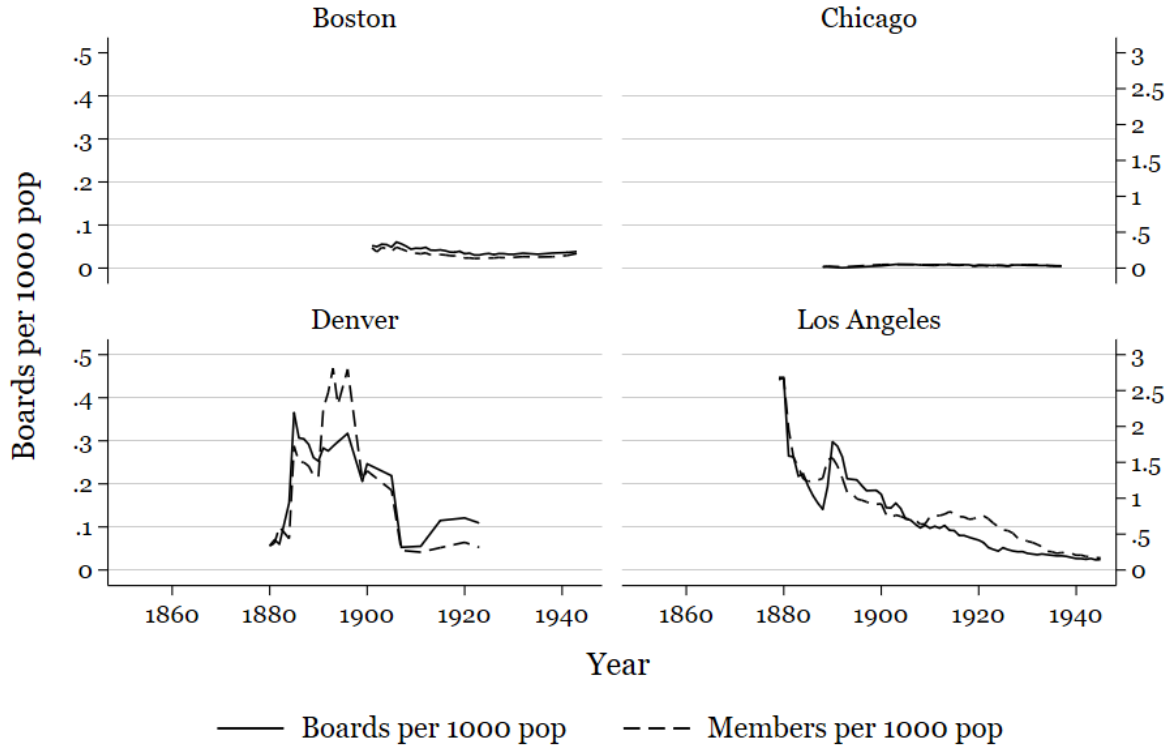
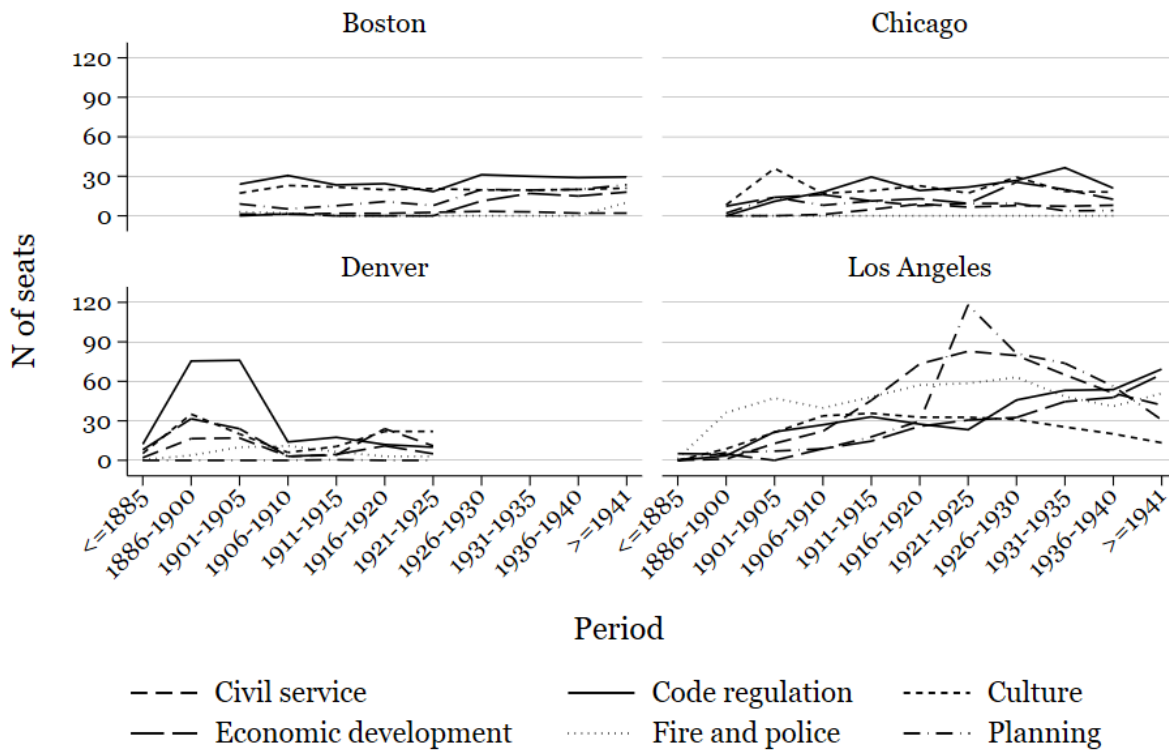


Figure A2: Trends by board remits for each city



Appendix B: City Case Studies

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 Michael 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 acts² (including how they managed boards³) 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

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. The Great Chicago Fire had 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

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

³In 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).

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).⁷ 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 sunseting 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

⁷ 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).

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, 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.

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).

Soon, however (largely spurred by the 1893 depression and a collapse of the silver market), efforts at reform wrested control from these forces and lay the groundwork for first populist then Progressive reformers to control local politics. The 1893 market collapse 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). Under 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).

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 lost the next election, with a return to a standard strong mayor system of government. The local political machine and reformers traded 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.

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 increases 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).

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).⁸

⁸ 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).