Governing the Gilded Age City:
Local Institution Building in the United States

Beginning in the late 1800s, dramatic population growth, immigration, economic instability, inequality, and industrialization created new policy demands that pushed local governments in the US to expand their capacity. Appointed boards and commissions were an important tool for managing the complex challenges of cities during this transformative period for American cities but are not well documented or analyzed. We introduce a new dataset 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 political regimes and organizational life, we demonstrate the utility of our new dataset through two applications: comparing the prevalence of boards (particularly civil service boards) under Progressive versus other urban regimes, as well as the relationship between local civic organizing and the presence of cultural boards.

Introduction

The turn of the last century (late 1800s to the mid-1900s) was a period of dramatic transformation of urban areas in the United States. Explosive population growth, industrialization, immigration, economic instability, political conflicts, rising inequality, and expansions of group rights created new policy demands that weighed heavily on local governments. In this article, we focus on one tool available to urban political regimes: appointed boards and commissions. A careful accounting of these local political institutions helps us better understand governance arrangements during a defining period in urban development that shapes American cities to this day.

Our new dataset offers 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. The "Governing the Gilded Age City" (GGAC) dataset covers more than 4,000 boards and 30,000 board members across the four cities. In this paper, we discuss the data collection process, detail general trends in the data, and classify boards into issue-based categories. For example, the presence and growth of boards that oversee areas like code enforcement, cultural issues, and civil service represent many of the key local conflicts of the time.

We then demonstrate the potential uses of this new database through two applications. First, we examine the impact of political regimes—machine versus Progressive—on the presence of boards in general as well as on the specific types of boards associated with those two different political movements. To this end, we further expand these data to include measures of local political control, captured from primary and secondary accounts of mayoral campaigns and administrations during this time period.

Second, we use the boards data to understand the relationship between local civic capacity and the presence and investment in boards. To do so, we provide a new measure of the density of civic engagement and organizational life in cities, with a particular focus on women's organizing. Counter to expectations, we show that in the institutionalization of cultural boards preceded strong civic capacity, providing more support to a model of policy feedback than a flow of policy from private to public provision.

Local governance has shaped and been shaped by local boards and commissions throughout American history, but systematic data on these boards or their membership has been rare. These data can speak to key questions in the study of urban political development, as well as theoretical and empirical questions concerning American political parties, policymaking, 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 was home to just over 10,000 people in 1880. In a mere 50 years, the city grew to more than 1.2 million (110 times its size in 1880) and replaced Boston as the fifth largest city. Chicago's growth is not quite as dramatic (it increased just 6.7 times across this period)

but its size was 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, nearly 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). Political elites searched for solutions as these policy demands often overwhelmed local governments. Local public boards and commissions offered one mechanism for improved policy making and implementation.

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; 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 cities' 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.

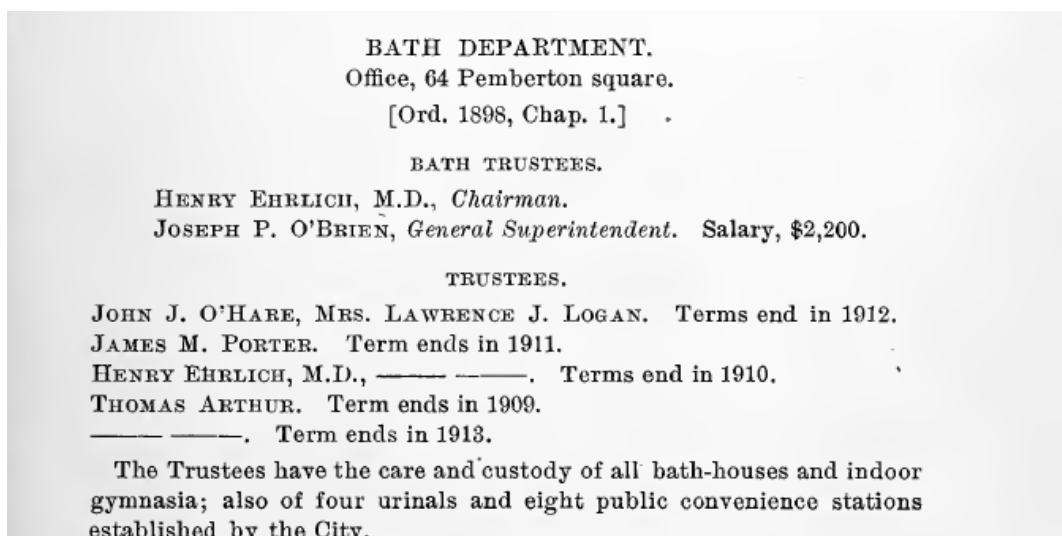### The Governing the Gilded Age City (GGAC) database

The GGAC database contains information on both boards and board members. The board information includes the remit of the board, who nominates members, how many members, how this information varies by years, and when that exact board first appears in official records. The member information features detailed information about the individual members who serve on these boards, including their names, dates of service, and who nominated or appointed them.

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 1940s from the sources detailed below.

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 registers contain 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 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 1888-1938 (though data are sparse prior to 1900), covering more than 3,000 board members. Board data varies from year to year, but generally includes such information as is contained in Figure 2: 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). 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 3). 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 further learn from the Almanac that he is the rabbi at Temple Emanual and he lived at 733 8th Ave.

Figure 3: 1915 Library Board in Denver

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 (see figure 4). Using this information, we create the board composition of each board in each year.

Figure 4: 1880 Board of Health Commissioners in Los Angeles

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. We use counts of members and boards as a method of examining these trends at a higher scale. Because we do not have a full time series of data for all cities, it is difficult to say exactly when certain boards are created, but we can identify when the boards first come into existence in our dataset. At the same time, however, it is a challenge to identify precisely *when* a particular kind of policymaking emerges in many cities because boards also evolve over time in their policy agendas. For example, Los Angeles created a second library board in 1900 but that board was no longer on the rolls in 1904; an evaluation of archival meeting minutes reveals that the second board was created to select a location for a new library. Do we count that as creating a new board? We hope that by providing the full set of boards, scholars interested in questions about local policy and politics can use our data in conjunction with qualitative and contextual information.

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.

Table 2. Governing the Gilded Age City (GGAC) 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

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 (see figure 5). 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 generally resemble that of the boards.

Figure 5: Growth of boards and board membership over time
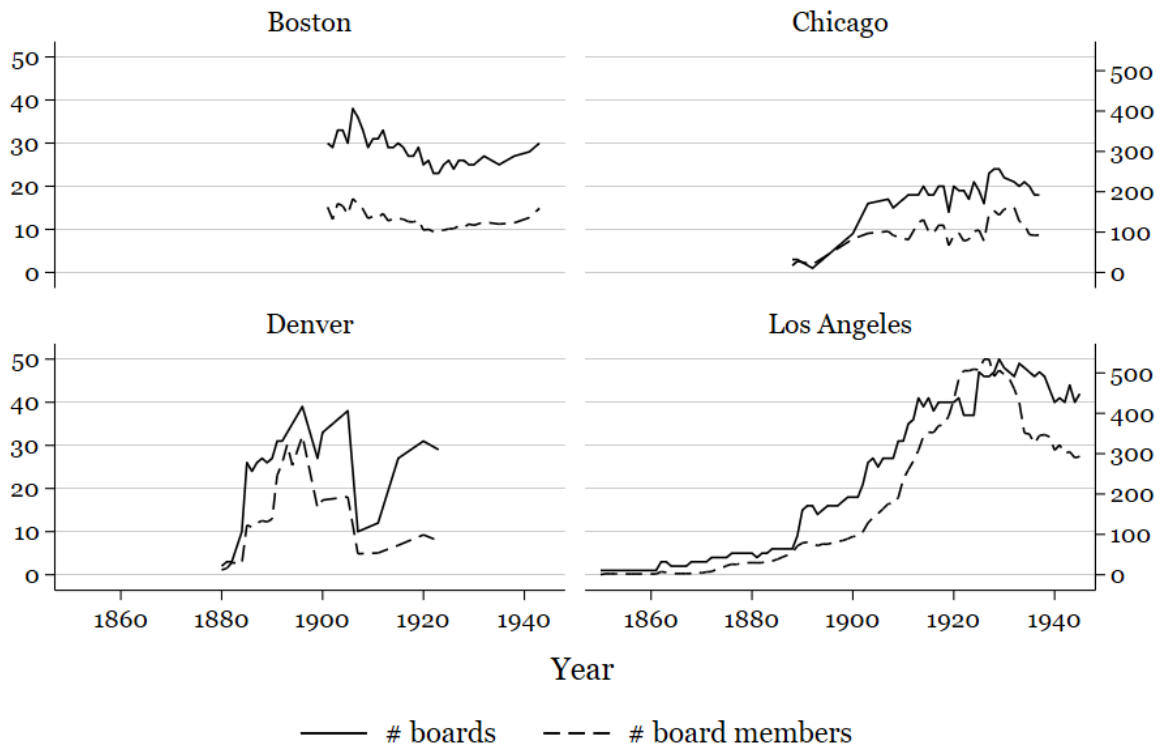
Appendix Figure A1 shows this growth in per capita terms: Both Boston and Chicago have significantly fewer boards and board members per capita than the faster-growing cities of Denver and Los Angeles, and they show almost no growth over time, suggesting that board membership grew proportionately with population. Interestingly, Los Angeles's fast growth in boards is far outstripped by its population growth, so that board membership per capita declines over time.

To fully explore the ways that local boards represent policy priorities, 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	334	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: more people means more building resulting in 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 presence and staffing of culture boards (as well as fire and police board) also follows a similar pattern of a rising trend

until 1905, followed by stabilization. Unlike code regulation, however, culture boards and fire and police boards do not show any increase in the 1930s.

Figure 6: Number of boards by remit type
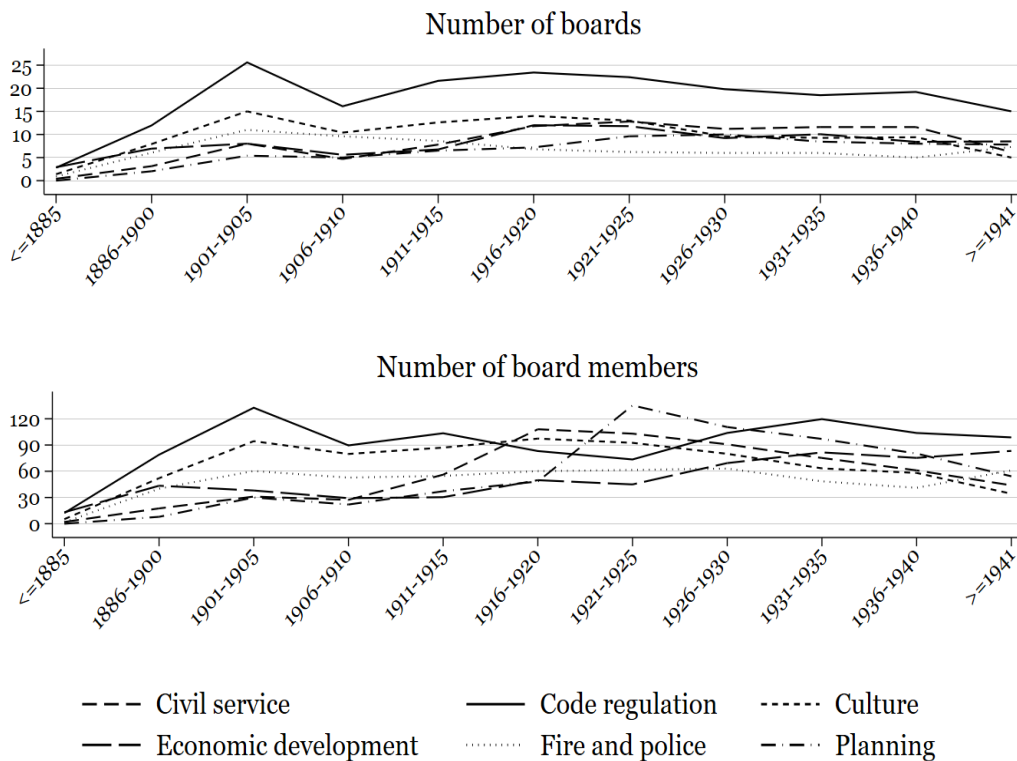
In contrast, boards related to civil service regulation, economic development, and planning show a sharp increase only after 1906, and a small decline after 1930. Some of the increase in civil service boards is a natural consequence of the earlier increase in the number of boards: As cities expanded 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. These developments may also reflect broader patterns of influence of the Progressive

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movement, which aimed to "remove political considerations from hiring and firing decisions," and thus spurred the enactment of civil service reforms in several cities (Kuipers and Sahn 2023). 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). These rich data open up a number of possible research paths, particularly when combined with other data from this period. Here, we consider two such applications.

Application Example: Urban Regimes and Local Boards

As cities expanded and transformed at the end of the 1800s and early 1900s, two types of urban political regimes emerged: urban party machines and the reaction against them, the Progressive movement. The struggle between Progressives and political machines shaped the form and function of cities in ways that persist into the modern day (Erie 1992; Stone 1996; Trounstine 2008). Did this struggle also shape the presence and investment in different kinds of boards? These two types of urban regimes pursued distinct goals and strategies, with distinct consequences. Despite an extensive literature, previous research has not examined the ways in which these different regime types used local boards as a tool for patronage and policymaking.

Context and Expectations

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 the boards themselves and the staffing of them—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 boards 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 their 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 based on loyalty to the machine.

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). Progressive reformers advocated for institutional reforms that would help dilute the power of political machines and immigrant voters, while also providing citizen input into policymaking (Pincetl 2003; Buenker 1973). 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).

Appointed boards provided a natural venue for accomplishing Progressive goals: Progressives could expand the set of individuals involved in making decisions for the city, while still controlling access to these positions of power. But recent work often points to the null effects of the Progressive movement on local policy outcomes (Carreri, Payson, and Thompson 2023; Sahn 2023), suggesting we might not expect to find a distinctive pattern for boards in cities with Progressive regimes. In sum, it is an empirical question as to whether machines or Progressives would create more boards or appoint more members to these appointed boards.

The presence of boards might also speak to the specific policy goals of these regimes. 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 presence of specific boards are indicators of the issues prioritized by governing coalitions, and the groups they sought to appease and reward with initiatives. We expect that Progressive administrations used 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 therefore expect that Progressive governments would prioritize boards associated with political reform, good government, and social services relative to machine governments.

Data on political regime type

We supplement our boards data with information on city governance 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 9% of the time in Boston, 25% in Chicago, 30% in Denver and 45% in Los Angeles. We provide descriptive data on the share of years where unaffiliated, machine, and Progressive mayors control each of these cities in Appendix Table A1.

Progressive mayors and appointed boards

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 lag the measure of Progressive administrations so as to estimate the effect on boards in the next time period; we find very similar effects if we measure the mayoral administration and boards in the same time period. We find that cities have, on average, eight more boards and 128 more board members under

Progressive mayors compared to machine mayors; this difference is statistically significant (Table 4, columns 1 and 4).

Table 4: Political Regime Type and Boards and Board Members

	# boards			# board members		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Total	Civil Service	Code Regulation	Total	Civil Service	Code Regulation
Progressive mayor (lagged)	8.256**	1.885**	0.849	128.181**	25.149**	15.171**
	(1.326)	(0.403)	(0.523)	(20.394)	(4.262)	(4.348)
100k population	-0.604**	-0.077**	-0.031*	-4.917**	-0.866**	-0.338*
	(0.066)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.913)	(0.179)	(0.132)
Time trend	0.555**	0.093**	0.064**	4.403**	0.774**	0.408**
	(0.057)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.656)	(0.137)	(0.130)
Constant	11.592**	-0.319	3.350**	43.889**	-5.686*	14.851**
	(1.568)	(0.275)	(0.700)	(12.767)	(2.242)	(4.894)
Mean of dep var	26.6	2.6	5.4	180.7	19.2	29.7
Observations	152	152	152	152	152	152
R^2	0.62	0.45	0.14	0.50	0.45	0.20

Robust standard errors in parentheses
+ $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$

To test our expectation that we should observe more reform-oriented boards during Progressive administrations, we focus on 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 presence 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 observe more code regulation boards 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 almost 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 substantively greater, consistent with the increase in the number of such boards. We find that these relationships remain similar if we include city fixed effects (see Appendix Table B1).

These robust relationships confirm that boards were used as political tools by local regimes, with Progressive regimes characterized by more boards overall and specifically in the policies areas most important to their goals. Future research might use the GGAC data to ask questions about whether these boards served primarily policy goals or political goals. Such avenues could include examining whether elected leaders keep board members on the board versus engage in a full scale replacement of board members, and whether board members have technical skills, training, or degrees to match the board expertise, or have political connections to those in power (such as dynastic connections).

Application example: Civic organizations, women's activism, and cultural boards

The late 1800s and early 1900s are also characterized by a dramatic increase in civic engagement in cities and broadening of local organizational life (Gamm and Putnam 1999; Schlesinger 1944; Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003; Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000). This explosion of organizations included labor unions and guilds for a multitude of occupations, an enormous range of fraternal and social organizations, religious clubs and associations, and multiple organizations representing hobbies and other interests.

A common narrative is that these civic organizations transformed the form and function of American cities, as they established charities, organized social and cultural events, advocated for workers and immigrants, promoted civic engagement, and eventually advocated for the institutionalization of private civic action (Bowden 1930). While often organized into federated national associations, these organizations were highly localized, and as such, advocated for a range of changes to city structure and policymaking. To the extent they were successful, we might expect that a flourishing civic organizational presence would be associated with local government investment in such areas as public services, recreational programs, cultural institutions, and a robust civic life.

We especially expect that *women's* organizational activism would be associated with local government investment in such areas. Accompanying the general rise in local organizational activity was the birth of the Women's Club movement and a shift of women

into public life (Bowden 1930; Missemer and Vianna Franco 2024). 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 were encouraged to engage in "municipal housekeeping," bringing their natural caregiving and purity to questions of public health, education, public morality, and child labor (Holman 2015; Morris-Crowther 2004). 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 and encouraged governments to take up these tasks. Alternatively, the direction of influence may have gone the other way, with local boards and associated government programs creating politicized populations who then organize in support of these (and other) issues and interests. The policy feedback literature has emphasized this channel in the classic case of the creation of Social Security and the political mobilization of older Americans (Campbell 2011) or recent urban policies around immigration (Williamson 2020) or charter schools (Lay 2022).

Data on civic organizations

To evaluate the impact of civic organization strength on the presence of boards, we follow Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2004) and 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 at the start of each decade, and (b) the total number of women's organizations, which we define as 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 for intermediate years. These measures vary both across cities and over time (Appendix Table A2). Boston had the highest number of civic organizations, followed by Los Angeles. For women's clubs, Chicago had the highest number of women's organizations, followed by Boston. We also see considerable growth over time, both in the number of organizations and in the number of women's organizations.

To test the expectation that local organizing strength was associated more local government action in those areas—as reflected in the presence and size of boards—we focus on cultural boards. In general, many local organizations were rooted in, and advocated for, racial, ethnic, and religious cultural traditions and events. Women's organizations in particular were active in the culture life of cities—creating, patronizing, and supporting the arts. Importantly, such activism was viewed as an appropriate interest for women, the traditional keepers of civilization and culture (Sivulka 1999). Thus, we might expect to see that women's organizational activity will be associated with the presence of culturally-related boards, including those concerned with the arts, libraries, and public spaces.

Civic organizations and cultural board presence

Counter to expectations, we find that growth in the number of cultural boards 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 presence pre-dates local civic organizational growth
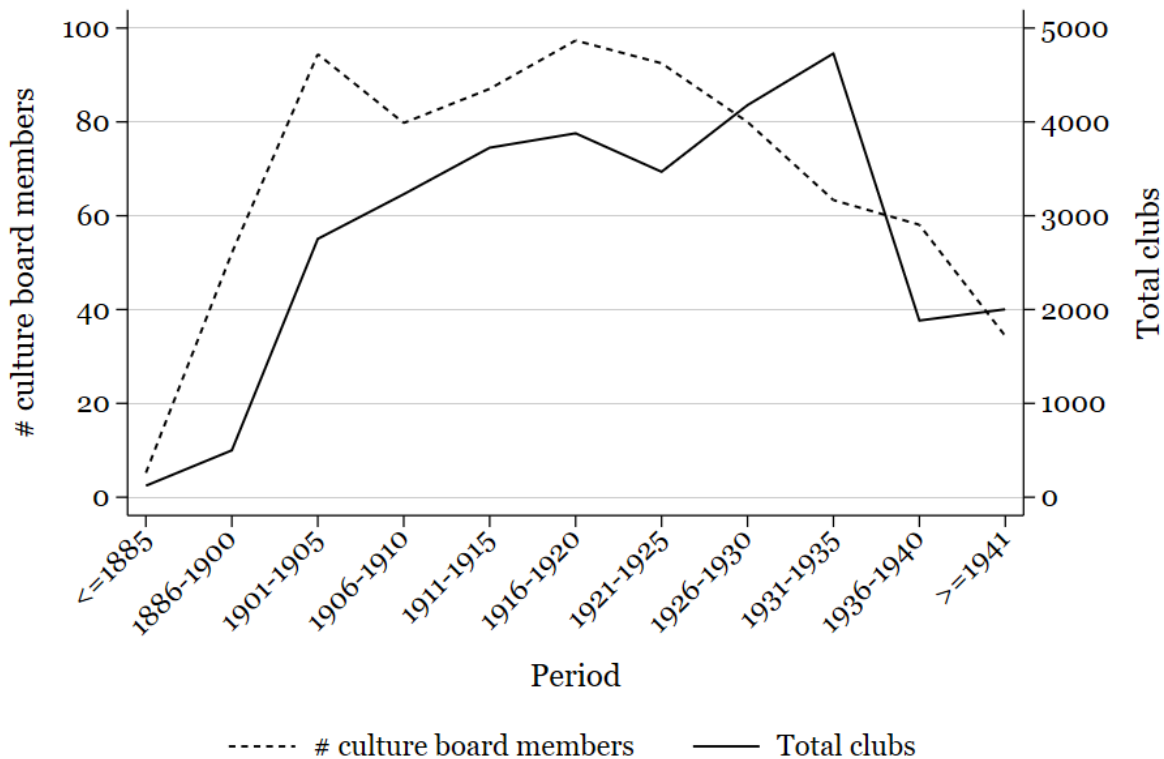
To examine the relationship formally, we regress the number of culture boards or culture board members (dependent variable) on the total number of civic organizations (clubs) in the city, as well as on the number of women's clubs, controlling for population and linear time trends. We lag both the total number of civic organizations and women's clubs, as a partial means to assess the temporal pattern. We find that the greater presence of civic organizations in the city is *not* associated with the greater presence 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

presence, 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. We continue to see these relationships when we use city fixed effects (see Appendix Table B2). Our analysis thus supports a policy feedback loop, rather than the creation of institutions in response to civic and private provision of services. These patterns demonstrate the usefulness of our data for challenging common assumptions about the why and when of the generation of institutions.

Table 5: Civic Organizing and Culture Board Presence and Staffing

	# culture boards			# culture board members		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
No. of clubs (lagged)	0.0002 (0.0003)	0.0003 (0.0003)	0.0003 (0.0003)	-0.0117** (0.0022)	-0.0050+ (0.0026)	-0.0079** (0.0026)
Women's clubs (lagged)	-0.0017 (0.0046)	-0.0066 (0.0040)	-0.0029 (0.0044)	0.1460** (0.0330)	0.0696* (0.0349)	0.1185** (0.0344)
100k population	-0.0248 (0.0185)	-0.0052 (0.0157)	-0.0221 (0.0190)	0.1502 (0.1505)	0.2951* (0.1352)	0.2126 (0.1584)
Time trend	-0.0141 (0.0168)	-0.0222 (0.0142)	-0.0176 (0.0168)	-0.1324 (0.0991)	-0.2672** (0.0991)	-0.2137* (0.1000)
Total boards		0.0709** (0.0109)				
Progressive mayor			0.3496 (0.2343)			8.1640** (2.6140)
Total board members					0.0505** (0.0083)	
Constant	4.07** (0.33)	2.51** (0.34)	4.01** (0.33)	24.46** (3.41)	19.06** (2.42)	22.91** (2.88)
Observations	118	118	118	118	118	118
R^2	0.13	0.38	0.15	0.10	0.39	0.21

Robust standard errors in parentheses. + p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01. The mean values for the number of culture boards and the number of culture board members are 3.3 and 24.1 respectively.

Discussion and conclusion

We have introduced a rich new dataset describing the institutionalization of policymaking in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in four large American cities. Our Governing the Gilded Age City (GGAC) dataset describes more than 4,000 boards, including their specific substantive remits, as well as more than 30,000 board members. Our data reveal considerable variation in the presence of board remits across time and space, raising multiple questions about both the causes and consequences of board presence. In our application examples, we demonstrate that Progressives were more likely to employ boards as a strategy to achieve their political ends, as they are associated with more boards overall and particularly regarding such topics as civil service, key to their anti-corruption goals. A second application finds that the presence of local organizations does not appear to drive the presence of boards, consistent with the policy feedback literature (e.g., Campbell 2011).

The 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 future work, we are particularly interested in when and where women got access to these forms of power. Were their appointments concentrated on boards related to their activism, as we discussed above? How do political changes like the implementation of women's suffrage affect 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, as well as a flourishing of urban organizational life, established policies, practices, and institutions that continue to shape cities today. The GGAC dataset offers an opportunity to deepen and complicate our understanding of this key period in urban political development.

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Appendix for Governing the Gilded Age City:
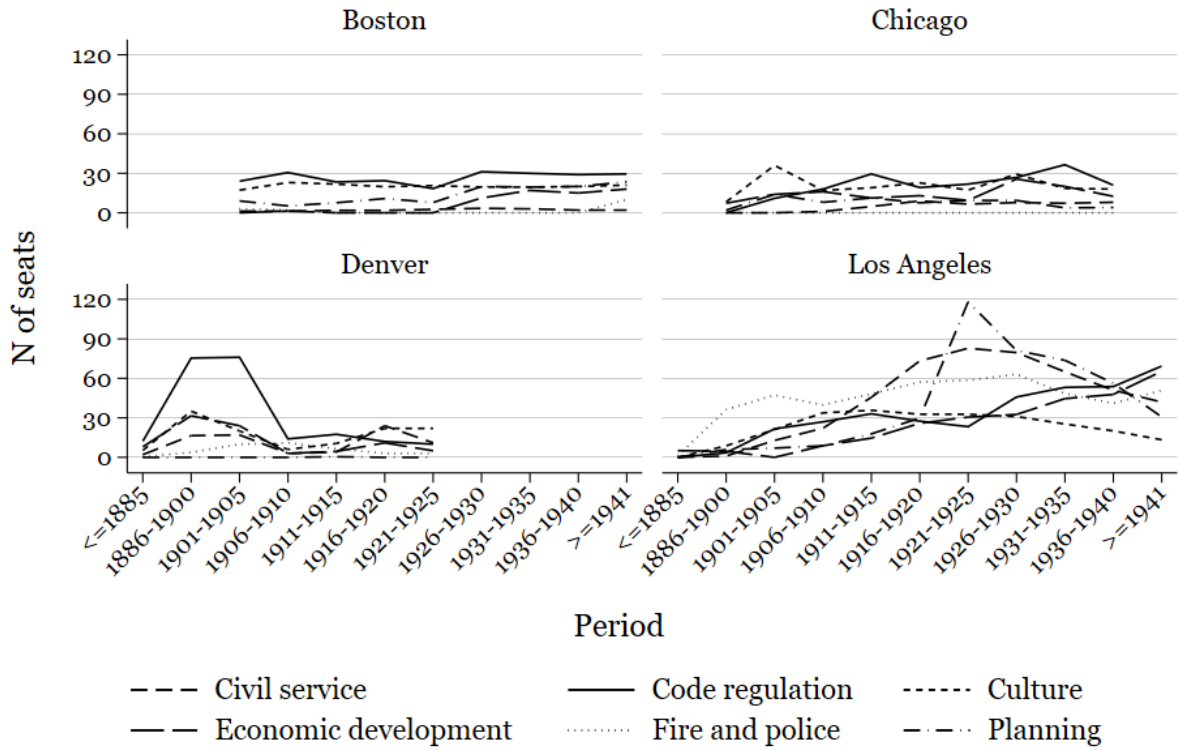## Local Institution Building in the United States

Figure A1: Growth of boards and board membership per 1000 population
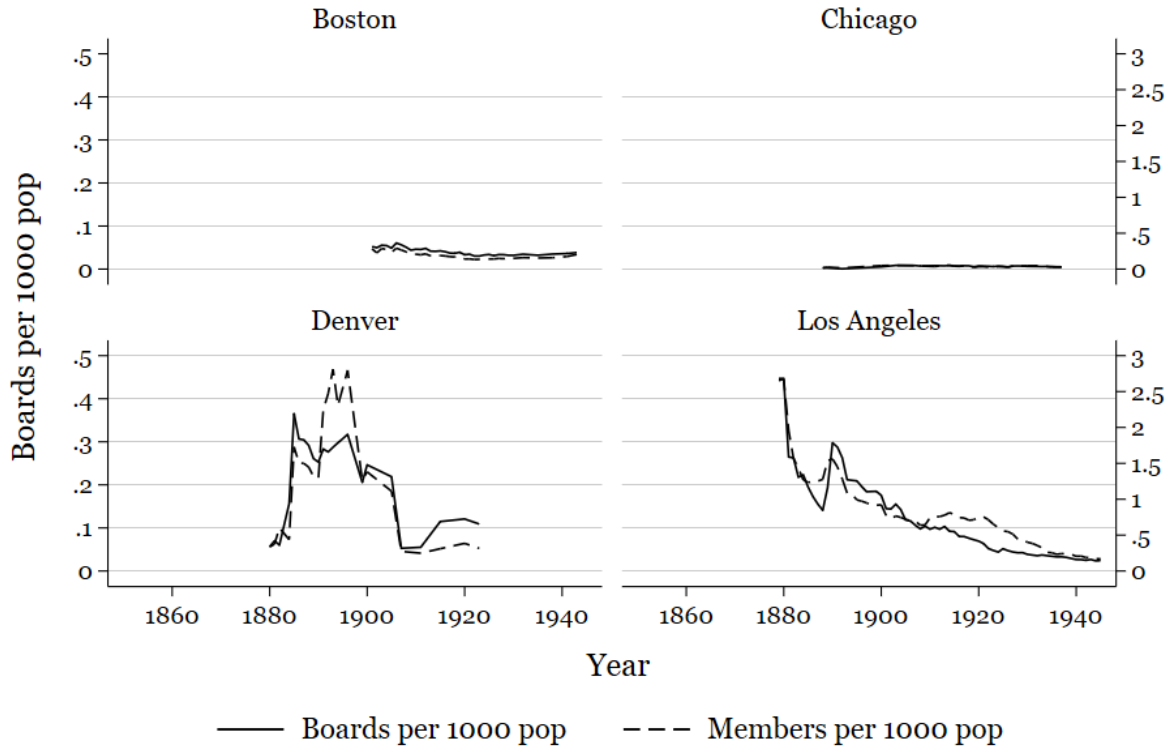
Figure A2: Trends by board remits for each city

Table A1: Political organization by city

City	% Progressives	% Political Machines	% Unaffiliated
Boston	9%	91%	1%
Chicago	25%	69%	6%
Denver	30%	35%	35%
Los Angeles	45%	35%	20%

Note: Figures represent percentages of years in our dataset where a mayor held office that was associated with the progressive movement, with political machines, or with neither.

Table A2: Measures of civic organizing by city

City	All Clubs		Women's Clubs	
	Lowest	Highest	Lowest	Highest
Boston	543	1976	38	244
Chicago	94	1217	13	422
Denver	95	604	1	131
Los Angeles	159	1725	20	134

Note: Lowest (highest) numbers also correspond with earliest (latest) dates. Earliest data are for 1879 in Boston, 1903 in Chicago, 1882 in Denver and 1891 in Los Angeles. Latest data are for 1940 in Boston, 1932 in Chicago, 1921 in Denver and 1931 in Los Angeles.

Table B1: Political Regimes and Board Creation and Staffing, with City Fixed Effects

	# boards			# board members		
	Total	Civil Service	Code Regulation	Total	Civil Service	Code Regulation
Progressive mayor (lagged)	7.521**	0.682**	1.610**	93.512**	14.777**	13.446**
	(1.131)	(0.254)	(0.338)	(16.981)	(3.125)	(3.436)
100k population	0.564*	0.074	0.285**	4.559	0.099	2.138**
	(0.234)	(0.047)	(0.067)	(2.798)	(0.499)	(0.628)
Time trend	0.295**	0.084**	0.003	2.663**	0.733**	0.066
	(0.087)	(0.013)	(0.024)	(0.967)	(0.163)	(0.232)
Boston	12.177**	-3.112**	4.716**	-14.367	-28.634**	7.012
	(2.397)	(0.362)	(0.557)	(24.503)	(3.890)	(4.987)
Chicago	-11.055**	-4.020**	-3.280**	-149.462**	-29.526**	-41.237**
	(3.690)	(0.999)	(1.008)	(48.606)	(9.174)	(9.033)
Denver	17.322**	0.489+	7.191**	71.265**	-3.769	42.886**
	(2.376)	(0.278)	(0.916)	(21.880)	(3.092)	(7.610)
Los Angeles	13.981**	0.695*	1.451**	98.692**	5.307+	6.950+
	(1.914)	(0.274)	(0.474)	(18.134)	(2.925)	(3.977)
Observations	152	152	152	152	152	152
R^2	0.95	0.89	0.92	0.87	0.80	0.83

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

Table B2: Civic Engagement and Board Creation and Staffing, with City Fixed Effects

	# culture boards	# culture board members
# clubs (lagged)	0.000	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.008)
Women's clubs (lagged)	0.001	0.162**
	(0.004)	(0.037)
100k population	0.053	0.723
	(0.086)	(0.797)
Time trend	-0.033+	-0.433**
	(0.017)	(0.156)
Progressive mayor	0.152	4.911+
	(0.284)	(2.947)
Boston	3.252**	5.920
	(0.785)	(7.294)
Chicago	2.366	12.975
	(1.976)	(18.693)
Denver	4.527**	28.915**
	(0.477)	(4.617)
Los Angeles	3.710**	17.901**
	(0.347)	(2.609)
Observations	118	118
R^2	0.93	0.89

Robust standard errors in parentheses. + $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$