

**WHY MACHINE VS. REFORM  
HAS STILL NOT WITHERED AWAY:  
REGIME CONFLICT AFTER THE  
FIRST (AND SECOND) BLACK MAYOR**

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All urban scholars are familiar with the distinction between machine and reform politics. These concepts have been a staple of the field for most of the 20th century and sections of the most popular textbooks are devoted to these concepts. Their application, however, is relegated to historical studies of mid-century ethnic politics or to fleeting references about Chicago and the Daley family. Usage of the concept of machine politics has atrophied in the scholarly world, particularly as minority politicians have replaced white-ethnic mayors.

Wolfinger drew the important and oft-forgotten distinction between *political machines*, the complex and sometimes centralized organizations that boasted hierarchical, clientelistic precinct and ward organizations and *machine politics*, which may be practiced by centralized party organizations, party factions, or personalistic organizations. Following Wolfinger (1972: 366), I define machine politics as "the manipulation of certain incentives to partisan political participation: favoritism based on political criteria

in personnel decisions, contracting, and administration of the laws." Hiring that is based on relationships rather than merit testing and that rewards friendship and electoral allegiance is typically an indicator of machine politics; this machine-style hiring can characterize blue- or white-collar jobs. So too, when government contracts, whether for construction, bonding, legal or other services, are distributed to political allies rather than through transparent, competitive processes to the lowest bidder, this is characteristic of machine-style politics.

In this paper I will argue that elections that pit two black politicians against each other frequently produce a machine vs. reform rhetoric, particularly in appeals to white voters who may be in a decisive position due to a division of the black vote. The distribution of endorsements and the pattern of white voting can be explained with reference to support for, or opposition to, candidates perceived to be likely to engage in machine-style politics.

I will employ a variety of indicators that will be the bases of assessment of whether candidates are perceived as reformers or machine politicians. Some of these indicators will be based on the actions of candidates and others will be based on how the candidates are portrayed by their peers and by the media. Indicators or criterion for designation as a reformer will be familiar to most students of urban politics. They include:

- designation as a "good-government" candidate, or emphasis on honesty and rectitude
- history of promotion of ethics policies or investigations
- policy perspective that emphasizes efficiency, rationality over politics, "wonkishness"
- job distribution based on merit and achievement not favors and exchange of electoral support; perceived as failing to reward ethnic or racial group, or otherwise "selling out" on ascriptive loyalty

- candidate whose elite education is emphasized
- opposition from traditional party organization
- opposition from blue collar unions

For the modern day machine politician, the characteristics that will serve as indicators for assignment of this designation are the following:

- accused of scandals that involve personal enrichment at taxpayer expense
- close political allies accused of scandalous behavior (personal enrichment at public expense)
- broad pattern (not single instance) of distribution of jobs and contracts as rewards for electoral or financial support, often to racial allies; punishment of enemies with withdrawal of jobs/contracts
- support of traditional party leaders and organization, even in primaries
- endorsement by blue collar unions that receive generous contracts/benefits
- characterized in media as machine politician, boss, machine hack

In the remainder of the paper I will present a series of case studies in which two black mayoral candidates were pitted against each other, either directly or as a contemporary candidate running against a predecessor's record. My focus on this circumstance is for multiple reasons. When the electoral competition pits a black candidate against a white candidate, we would intuitively expect intragroup divisions to be papered-over so that a unified coalition can win a contest that is likely to be viewed as about racial control over political power and privilege; empirically, this has been verified in a variety of cases.

When two black candidates run against each other in cities in which blacks are an electoral majority, or in one-party cities in which blacks are the majority of the dominant party, the importance of racial loyalty is diminished (but not negated, as is evident by the injection of rhetoric about Uncle Tom-ism and being "not black enough"). As racial polarization recedes in a contest in which the leading candidates are of the same

designation, other familiar factors may return to the forefront of electoral conflict. This paper tests the hypotheses that division between supporters of machine-style vs. reform politics once again emerges as a leading template in political conflict when race-based mobilization is absent. Machine vs. reform politics has not withered away in an era that some call post-racial.

## **PHILADELPHIA**

Are machine and reform politics still useful designations that advance analytical understanding of contemporary politics? The last twenty years or so of politics in Philadelphia presents interesting data for students of urban politics interested in this question.

In 1983 Wilson Goode was elected as the first Black mayor of Philadelphia. Goode was one among a cadre of prominent liberal Black politicians in Philadelphia who gained legitimacy and could garner the votes of both Blacks and Whites. Goode served the limit of two consecutive terms. In the era after the first black mayor, the City Council shifted from an arena in which white-ethnic conservatives fought the white-reform/Black coalition over the issue of minority political incorporation to one in which a biracial coalition of politicians who favor a machine style of politics are in conflict with a biracial coalition of procedural reformers interested in good-government. Black leaders became powerful figures within the Democratic organization that once tried to subordinate them. Issues of patronage, the dispensation of city contracts, the selection of candidates for political offices, and the spoils of large scale economic development are all areas in

which they can align with union officials, party politicians (including Republicans) and parts of the business community. But other Black leaders (many of whom are political disciples of former Congressman William Gray) remain committed to the good government tenets they share with the city's dwindling White liberals and fragments of the business community. In short, two biracial coalitions now exist in Philadelphia. Mayor Goode walked the line between both groups, and depending on the issue, was a champion or a disappointment to either group.

In 1991, white District Attorney Edward Rendell entered the race to succeed Goode, as did a number of black candidates. The Black vote divided between former Councilman Lucien Blackwell, a politician always ready to bend any rule or issue any threatening pronouncement in order to wring concessions on behalf of his poor, African American constituency and an Ivy League-educated Black reformer, Councilman George Burrell (who later switched sides). With the Black vote divided, Rendell easily won the Democratic primary and then the mayor's office in a city that has not elected a Republican since the 1950s.

Rendell's two terms ended and in 1999 City Council President John Street, an African-American Democrat, was elected. Though Goode and Street were both Democrats and Black, and both were elected by multiracial coalitions of Blacks, a small share of Whites, and a majority of Latinos, their politics diverge. Street is a master of machine-style politics who sought to use his power to reward friends and punish enemies. Over the past three decades, there have been few if any people in Philadelphia who understood the details of

the city's budget better than Street. Mayor Rendell said many times that the economic achievements of his administration were equally the achievement of John Street.

Street was a recluse, so he really had no close allies. However, he did have a strong alliance with John Dougherty, the undisputed labor boss of Philadelphia. Street appointed him to be the chairman of the Redevelopment Authority of Philadelphia, a patronage-rich agency from which Dougherty could guarantee enforcement of union work rules.

Governor Rendell had also appointed him to be a commissioner of the Delaware River Port Authority, another source of blue-collar public payroll jobs. Mayor Street was generous when it came to union contracts and union workers, both black and white, supported him electorally and financially (Schaffer 2003). Along similar lines, Street had a solid alliance with Bob Brady, the long-time head of the local Democratic organization. Like those who earned the approbation "boss" before him, Brady's organization did lots of favors and was able to deliver votes. Brady's organization persuaded just enough white ethnic voters to support Wilson Goode at the depths of his unpopularity and his precinct army did the same for John Street (who at least promised a thorough familiarity with quid pro quo politics) (Fellinger 1999). Street's administration accumulated huge deficits, but he also achieved a wide range of accomplishments that benefitted the business community of the city as well as some of the poorest, blighted black neighborhoods (Twyman 2005). Although he was the target of an FBI probe, he left office untouched by scandal but widely suspected of corruption (McCoy and Gelbart 2005).

**Figure 1: Is John Street a machine-style politician?**

INDICATOR	COMMENTS
accused of scandals that involve personal enrichment at taxpayer expense	X
close political allies accused of scandalous behavior (personal enrichment at public expense)	X Street's City Treasurer and Assistant Chief of Staff were indicted (Philadelphia Inquirer 1/11/05)
broad pattern (not single instance) of distribution of jobs and contracts as rewards for electoral or financial support, often to racial allies; punishment of enemies with withdrawal of jobs/contracts	X Bonding firms that contributed to the mayor's campaign received city business and those not friendly with the mayor are cut out (Philadelphia Inquirer 1/11/05)
support of traditional party leaders and organization, even in primaries	X
backing/endorsement of blue collar unions that receive generous contracts/benefit	X
characterized in media as machine politician, boss, machine hack	X

The current mayor of Philadelphia is Michael Nutter, a black former member of City Council who got his start in politics working with the good-government faction of Bill Gray and Gray's ally Angel Ortiz. Nutter has been described in the media as a "good-government warrior," who is "smart, non-hackish" (Fagone 2007). For a brief time he was an ally of John Street but broke with the mayor when Nutter championed the creation of an ethics board (and sunshine provisions for no-bid contracting) on the City Council. Nutter is a graduate of the Wharton business school, is widely thought of as a policy wonk, and prior to his election had no support from Philadelphia's corrupt, contented, and very powerful building trades unions. He also did not have the support of the traditional party organization or any of his fellow Democratic Party council members (Goodman 2007). His racial credentials, specifically whether he is "black enough," were routinely questioned in campaign press coverage.

When Nutter ran in the Democratic primary, he campaigned against the term-limited Street rather than the other candidates (one of whom was Bob Brady). One of his most widely aired television commercials showed a cartoon hand ripping the roof off of City Hall and reaching in to grab and throw out unidentified people; the voice-over declared that Nutter would “throw out the bums in City Hall who have been ripping us off for years” (Goodman). Street’s 2003 Republican opponent, also ran against Street’s record of “cronyism” and “pay-to-play” contracts (Gorenstein and Fitzgerald 2003).

**Figure 2: Is Michael Nutter a Reformist Politician?**

INDICATOR	COMMENTS
designation as a "good-government" candidate, or emphasis on honesty and rectitude	X
history of promotion of ethics policies or investigations	X
policy perspective that emphasizes efficiency, rationality over politics, wonkishness	X Known for position papers with lots of footnotes
job distribution based on merit and achievement not favors and exchange of electoral support; perceived as failing to reward ethnic or racial group, or otherwise "selling out" on ascriptive loyalty	X Director of Good-Government watchdog organization said, “In the Philadelphia political culture, he is pretty darn clean.” (Fagone 2007)
candidate whose elite education is emphasized	X
opposition from traditional party organization	X prior to being elected, not subsequent. Has not yet sought reelection assistance
opposition from blue collar unions	X unceasing



## NEWARK

Newark's breakthrough black mayor was Kenneth Gibson, elected in 1970. Gibson, a civil engineer and community leader, had a long tenure as mayor (1970-86) and was followed by Sharpe James, an African-American city council-member committed to change and reforming City Hall to "function as a business, not as a social or political club" (Cunningham 2002:363). Like the mornin' glories that Plunkitt of Tammany Hall made famous, James' reformist streak did not last long and he built a comprehensive machine-style organization that has governed Newark for more than two decades. James has been described as a "machine politician," a "machine pol," and the head of a "well-oiled machine" (Yeager 2002; Boyer 2008:38; Jacobs 2002). In 2002 James defeated African-American challenger Cory Booker, an attorney who had served one term on city council, by the narrow margin of 3,500 votes. Shortly before the 2006 election, James withdrew and Booker easily defeated James' vice mayor.

Although James had certainly compiled a list of accomplishments, including significant reductions in crime and improvement in the vitality of downtown Newark, Booker called for an "end to corrupt, race-based bossism" (Jacobs 2005; Boyer 2008:38). Booker promised to turn the city's emphasis away from downtown toward building new housing and parks that would make Newark more of an attractive, garden city; the James campaign called this gentrification for whites (Will 2002). James' campaign team harassed Booker's supporters and threatened city employees with dismissal if they supported Booker (Jacobs 2002). James questioned Booker's "credentials as a black man" and argued that his support

of school voucher programs indicated that he was a pawn of white Republicans (Will 2002).

When James withdrew from the race, his vice mayor and longtime Newark politician Ronald Rice attempted to replicate James' attacks on Booker. He harped on Booker's novice status, the fact that he grew up in middle-class suburban New Jersey, supported vouchers, raised most of his money outside the state, and sounded like a Republican (Parks and Wang 2006; Cave and Benson 2006; Mays and Wang 2006). Booker's response on the voucher issue showed again his efficiency/rationality emphasis; he defended himself, saying "public education is the use of public dollars to educate our children at the schools that are best equipped to do so" whether they are parochial or charter schools (Cave and Benson 2006).

**Figure 3: Is Sharpe James a Machine Politician?**

INDICATOR	COMMENTS
accused of scandals that involve personal enrichment at taxpayer expense	X Accused of fraudulent use of city credit cards for personal entertainment (Boyer 2008).
close political allies accused of scandalous behavior (personal enrichment at public expense)	X Indictments on land deals flipping city properties (Boyer 2008).
broad pattern (not single instance) of distribution of jobs and contracts as rewards for electoral or financial support, often to racial allies; punishment of enemies with withdrawal of jobs/contracts	X Punishment of Firefighters Union, delayed contract negotiations; indefensibly generous deals for city land with developers (Jacobs 2002; Damien Cave, "Booker Says Newark Mayor is 'Giving Away Our Land,'" <u>New York Times</u> , April 19, 2006.).
support of traditional party leaders and organization, even in primaries	X Personalistic organization under James' control
backing/endorsement of blue collar unions that receive generous contracts/benefit	X Only one union did not support James

characterized in media as machine politician, boss, machine hack	X repeated examples
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**Figure 4: Is Cory Booker a Reformer Politician?**

INDICATOR	COMMENTS
designation as a "good-government" candidate, or emphasis on honesty and rectitude	X
history of promotion of ethics policies or investigations	NO
policy perspective that emphasizes efficiency, rationality over politics, wonkishness	X "Nothing black about Newark's ailments." (Boyer 2008)
job distribution based on merit and achievement not favors and exchange of electoral support; perceived as failing to reward ethnic or racial group, or otherwise "selling out" on ascriptive loyalty	X Hired a white Police Chief, outraged many and explained, "The best person for the job was not black." (Boyer 2008)
candidate whose elite education is emphasized	X Rhodes scholar, Yale Law School
opposition from traditional party organization	X Nonpartisan urban environment. James has personalistic, powerful organization.
opposition from blue collar unions	X Opposed by every union except Firefighters in 2002; 2006 SEIU endorses also prior to James withdrawal. After James withdrawal, Booker receives all union endorsements except Newark Teachers Union.

## NEW ORLEANS

Following the patterns of so many US cities, the period from the 1960s to the 1980s was one of declining white population and expanding Black population in the city of New Orleans. As well, the city's surrounding suburbs showed a dramatic gain in white population and reached 53% of the metropolitan area's total. The white population fell about 156,000 and the Black population grew about 86,000 in the city during the twenty-year period. The city of New Orleans has remained vital for a number of reasons; tourism is the most obvious, but gentrification and suburban symbiosis are also very important. Even tourists would not get the impression that the French Quarter is the only vibrant part of the city. The Garden District, filled with once grand mansions, has never been deserted by the propertied class and renovators have transformed parts of the Vieux Carre, Fauborg Marigny, the Irish Channel and the Lower Garden District into inviting hamlets for gentrifiers (Laska and Spain 1978: 4-7). Suburban New Orleans, specifically Jefferson Parish, represents the richest area in the state. The adamant refusal of this parish to levy taxes on itself has left them with few of the entertainment amenities that suburbanites typically rely on to reduce their need to interact with the city; consequently, New Orleans remains an important entertainment venue for locals, not just the global tourist class.

One of the earliest cases of mayoral competition between two black candidates came in New Orleans. Back in 1978 Ernest Morial became the first black mayor of the city and he won reelection in 1982. In both elections "Dutch" Morial ran against white

opponents. Because New Orleans' electorate was not majority black, in each instance Morial had to build a biracial coalition of the vast majority of the city's black voters and a sliver of white liberals. Morial was part of the Civil Rights era generation and his black electoral base derived from the NAACP, over which he presided in the 1960s (Hirsch 1991). In his first election, Morial upset politics-as-usual in New Orleans by drawing black voters away from the moderate white candidates to whom they were tied by patronage since the 1950s when Mayor DeLesseps "Chep" Morrison created the Crescent City Democratic Association political machine (Rosenzweig 1967:209). Once in office Morial challenged the patronage politics of his predecessor Moon Landrieu by not reappointing blacks who served in the Landrieu administration; instead he recruited on the basis of merit from the private sector and Harvard's Kennedy School (Whelan and Young 1989).

Term limits forced Mayor Morial, to leave office in 1985; in their absence most breakthrough black mayors serve far longer than two four-year terms and Morial made an unsuccessful bid to change the city's charter. Two black candidates and one white contender emerged. They were former city councilman Sidney Barthelemy, current State Senator William Jefferson, and Sam LeBlanc, a long-serving civil servant who was white. White voters, in this pattern of electoral field, are faced with a strategic choice: Should they unite behind the white candidate (and make an effort to reclaim their lost control of the city's highest office) or should they play a decisive role in electing the black candidate that is perceived to better serve their racial interests? Of course it goes without saying that strategic decision-making is often plagued by an absence of perfect

information; nevertheless, we make the assumption that white voters are grappling with this question to the best of their ability. Barthelemy was a well-coifed, light-skinned Creole with indubitable middle-class credentials, a history of serving the interests of the business establishment on the City Council against Mayor Morial, and a pedigree that began with Moon Landrieu. Jefferson was dark-skinned, had a base from previous elections in low-income parishes, was a graduate of Harvard Law School, and was a strong defender of all aspects of the administration of Morial, from whom he received an endorsement. LeBlanc simply was not the quality candidate around which the White community could rally; he did not have the long-standing community service of Philadelphia's Edward Rendell nor did he have the name recognition and organizational prowess of Richie Daley in Chicago, both of whom recaptured the mayoral office, under the Democratic Party banner, after breakthrough black mayors (Keiser 2000).

In New Orleans' nonpartisan structure, Barthelemy and Jefferson finished the election with the two highest vote tallies; however, because neither received an absolute majority, a runoff was necessitated. Barthelemy won 40 percent of the white vote with LeBlanc in the race, testimony to the trust he had from the business community and those who feared a reprise of Morial's dismantling of the Southern status quo. In the runoff, whites flocked to Barthelemy; he won 85 percent of the white vote, only 25 percent of the black vote, and became mayor with 58 percent of the overall runoff vote. White voters chose the middle-class black candidate but they were hardly voting their class interests; instead, they were voting for a candidate that, in the words of one scholar, "knit together whites and a patronage-oriented black leadership that had no agenda beyond its own enrichment

and perpetuation” (Hirsch 2001:125). Barthelemy would “make no waves” and would return the city to the conciliatory style in which blacks earned an increasing share of spoils but did not threaten the economic authority of the white community. Barthelemy dispensed patronage jobs and lucrative contracts from previously untapped sources like the Housing Authority of New Orleans, the Regional Transit Authority and the Aviation Board. Not surprisingly, the non-competitive process of dispensation of professional service contracts at the airport drew criticism from federal auditors (Whelan and Young 1989) as did federally funded job training and housing programs that were larded with Barthelemy supporters and friends.

**Figure 5: Barthelemy as Machine-Style Politician, Jefferson as Reformer**

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Barthelemy</i>	<i>Jefferson</i>
accused in scandals that involve personal enrichment at taxpayer expense	X Administration repeatedly investigated	
broad pattern (not single instance) of distribution of jobs and contracts as rewards for electoral or financial support, often to racial allies;	X	
characterized in media as machine politician, boss, machine hack	X Return to machine-style of Morrison and Landrieu	
support of traditional party leaders and organization, even in primaries	X (non-partisan) Endorsements of SOUL and COUP, mobilization organizations in black community	
candidate whose elite education is emphasized		X Harvard Law Grad; never emphasized

Endorsement of previous machine or reform mayor		X Reformer Morial, history of fighting against patronage-based hiring
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## ATLANTA

The mayoral election in Atlanta in 1997 pitted incumbent Mayor Bill Campbell against incumbent City Council President Marvin Arrington. Both men had been fixtures in the African-American political scene for more than a decade. Both received numerous endorsements from Black clergy (Charles Walston, "14 Clergy Stand Up for Arrington," Atlanta Constitution, 30 September 1997). The Campbell campaign drew attention to the support Arrington received from wealthy Northside Republicans, including a number who had supported Campbell in 1993. Campbell's campaign also characterized Arrington as likely to downsize government and privatize city services. Arrington also received the endorsement of the Buckhead Coalition, the elite business organization of the region (Walston and Fears 1997a). The attention that the Campbell campaign gave to Arrington's white support, and Republican support, led him to publicly respond, stating "I don't have to explain my blackness to anybody. I know who I am" (Walston and Fears 1997b).

Arrington ran a reform-themed campaign that attacked the Campbell administration for corruption, incompetence in delivery of sewage and water services, rising crime and poor management, all classic "reform" themes. A former Campbell supporter who was a



prominent member of the white establishment formed an organization called Reform Atlanta in 1997 to document and publicize the mayor's poor management record and work to elect Arrington (Walston 1997b). Reform Atlanta produced considerable literature and publicity elaborating on the themes of Campbell's lack of ethics, incompetent appointments of friends, and his inability to run the city like a business ("Just the Facts," n.d.). The city's mainstream news organ, the *Atlanta Constitution*, gave a lukewarm endorsement to Arrington, criticizing Campbell for his contentious style, his poor management of city departments, and his failure to promote positive relations with the corporate community ("Arrington for Mayor," 1997).

The nonpartisan election system of Atlanta produced a multi-candidate field. The outcome failed to produce a majority, forcing a runoff between Campbell, who received 46 percent of the vote, and Arrington, who received 36 percent. In the runoff, Campbell won after Arrington made the serious blunder of attacking Campbell's most visible supporter, the first Black mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson. Campbell won 53 percent of the vote, and captured almost 70 percent of the vote in district 2, one of the poorest in Black Atlanta. Campbell also won in the working class white districts of Atlanta and Arrington captured the upper income white districts of northern Atlanta.

### **Relevance for Urban Scholarship**

One conclusion that should *not* be drawn from this research is that America's cities are in a post-racial politics period. The foolishness of such a conclusion is demonstrated when

mayoral elections pit one white candidate against a black candidate; the white candidate still may be seen as a “white hope,” and elites in the black community routinely discuss how to persuade other black candidates to withdraw so that they can unite behind one candidates, rather than be divided and conquered. Nothing about the reality or media perception of these contests seems post-racial. Furthermore, even when two black candidates face off, the nature of appeals to voters becomes racialized in charges of Uncle Tom-ism and racial loyalty.

What about the transformation from Civil Rights Era leaders to better-educated, more technocratic politicians? This is noteworthy, but scholars need to be more careful than journalists about not bending the facts of the politicians to fit the generalizations about such an alleged transformation. Civil Rights era mayors were often quite knowledgeable about policy, even technocratic, and some were well-educated (e.g., Kenneth Gibson, Harold Washington, Maynard Jackson). Additionally, simply because there is a much larger proportion of advanced degree holders in the entire black population today than there was forty years ago, there ought to be a greater proportion among elected officials. To the extent that this is a natural result of changes in educational attainment, too much should not be made of its political significance. Moreover, the pattern seen in the Irish case of minority incorporation anticipated this change; Green noted the “new breed of Irish politicians [who were] better educated, more discreet, less flamboyant” than their saloonkeeper predecessors (Green 1981:236).

In the cities discussed here, two competing biracial coalitions have emerged. One, the biracial liberal alliance, is familiar to readers of the work of Browning, Marshall, and Tabb. Particularly in Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Atlanta, the process of minority of minority incorporation in biracial, liberal coalition during the mayoralties of Wilson Goode, “Dutch” Morial, and, in Atlanta, both Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young, has been documented. This paper endeavors to demonstrate that a more conservative coalition has also thrived in these cities. This conservatism is pro-patronage, pro-business and uses mayoral prerogatives and discretion rather than progressive policies as a tool of redistribution to the African American community. Beneficiaries of this redistributive policy are obligated, explicitly rather than implicitly, to the mayor at election time.

This paper has demonstrated that the concepts of machine-style politics and anti-machine reformer are still valid and useful tools for scholars of urban political science. Whether we are looking at governing processes (e.g., who gets jobs and contracts, dynamics of coalition formation (or what scholars call “regime type”), or media framing, the practice of machine politics and organized opposition to these practices still characterizes government. In some of these cases, these regimes remain the dominant ones around which politics is organized. Machine organization and reform movements have not withered away. They have survived the New Deal and Nixon-Reagan conservatism, they have survived the DLC-Clinton New Democrats, and this form of politics continues to flourish in the post-ethnic era of urban politics dominated by African-Americans and other minorities.

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