

Raphael Sonenshein. *The City at Stake: Secession, Reform, and the Battle for Los Angeles.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. xxi + 306 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-11590-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-12603-6.



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Published on H-Urban (August, 2007)

The Next Chapter in Sonenshein's Tour de Force of Los Angeles Politics

Historically, in cities dominated by machine politics like Boston and New York, urban elites used reform to effectively disenfranchise immigrant and minority voters. Yet in this comprehensive, compelling, and meticulously researched study, Sonenshein argues that reform does not inherently belong to either conservatives or liberals, but “rather is a contested value of great importance” (p. 262). His primary goal in this masterful study of charter reform in Los Angeles is to recover a concern with institutional structure among political scientists and to reconceptualize reform as a potentially powerful tool for progressive politics.

The author suggests that understandings of reform as an elitist tool are rooted in regional bias and limited scholarly attention to urban politics in the U.S. West and Southwest. In cities like Los Angeles, characterized by nonpartisan elections, low levels of political organization, and the dispersal of government authority, reform has been far more influential “not just as the province of the ‘good government’ crowd, but as the game itself” (p. 15). Under such conditions, the battle is not between reformers and party machines, but between competing

visions of reform, such as the quest for business-like efficiency versus the struggle for minority representation. Western and southwestern cities thus provide excellent places in which to analyze how civic visions and coalitions are built and sustained in spite—or perhaps because of—these conditions.

The text is composed of nineteen short chapters, organized into six sections that trace the origins, process, and results of charter reform. Chapter 3 merits particular attention as one of the few chapters that could stand alone, perhaps for use in an undergraduate course. It shows how years of charter amendments created a confusing, contradictory institutional structure and built general consensus on the need for systematic and comprehensive reform—specifically, an enhanced role for the mayor, greater control of elected officials over departments and commissions, and increased democratic participation for ordinary citizens.

The convergence of two forces—the election of Mayor Richard Riordan and the threat of San Fernando Valley secession—made charter reform viable for the first time in decades. In 1997, the Los Angeles City Council agreed

to appoint a commission to draft a new city charter, but insisted that the council have right of review before the charter went before the voters. Incensed, Mayor Riordan financed a proposition to create an elected commission that could take its charter straight to the voters, which voters passed that same year. For two years, the commissions worked separately towards the same goal, and each was subject to powerful influences—the appointed commission to the city council, and the elected commission to the mayor and to organized labor. According to Sonenshein: “From the start, the two commissions were like competing siblings. Both had a mission that would have made more sense with only one commission, and each operated with an eye on the other” (pp. 105-106).

The author demonstrates that the leadership exhibited by the chairs of the two commissions was a major factor contributing to the ultimate success of charter reform. From the beginning, both chairs believed there had to be a single charter, and eventually decided to work together with the support of a joint conference committee to identify and make recommendations on all disagreements between the two commissions. Once united, the two commissions occupied the high ground of the charter reform debate, and the mayor and the city council were faced with the decision to either support the unified charter or appear opposed to popular reforms.

Voters approved the unified charter in June 1999 by a margin of 60 percent. The new charter expanded mayoral authority significantly, created a system of advisory neighborhood councils, and instituted area planning commissions. Two reforms that had once been on the table—a larger city council and administrative decentralization, such as a borough system—did not succeed. The new charter dissolved support for San Fernando Valley secession, which voters resoundingly rejected in 2002, and facilitated the resolution of the scandal involving the Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department and the statewide recall of Governor Gray Davis in 2003.

The study raises a number of important questions for the study of coalition-building in diverse cities. Few are better equipped to venture answers to these questions than Sonenshein, whose earlier study of Mayor Tom Bradley’s coalition of African American and white Jewish voters is canonical in the scholarly field of Los Angeles and urban politics.^[1] Sonenshein shows that charter reform ultimately succeeded in Los Angeles despite the city’s diversity, fragmentation, and low social capital. To explain this outcome, he develops a model of interracial coalitions that takes into account the importance of

interests, ideology, and leadership.

Sonenshein posits that “reform constituencies” support reform coalitions because of their beliefs about government and civic life, and that this ideology, rather than narrowly defined self-interest, is crucial to institutional change. He argues that “[i]n reducing all political action to self-interest we risk missing something important about civic capacity and civic participation. To many ordinary people who are not political actors except as voters and observers, what is right and wrong in government is quite important” (p. 264). Jewish voters on the west side of Los Angeles overwhelmingly supported the new charter, even though they generally felt well served by city government. He suggests that Latino immigrants may similarly provide the ideological as well as practical impetus for reform, which was partly confirmed by the 2005 election of Antonio Villaraigosa, the city’s first Latino mayor in over 150 years, which Sonenshein considers in the afterword of the 2006 edition.

The City at Stake is full of useful charts, tables, and maps, as well as an exceptional appendix that summarizes the new charter’s provisions. Sonenshein’s bibliography is likewise a valuable reference. The book is appropriate for graduate-level courses in urban politics or public policy and would be of interest to a popular audience with specialized interests in urban and public affairs. Because of its exhaustive and sometimes overwhelming level of detail, the book would not be a good choice for most undergraduates or non-specialists. The book’s discussion of the San Fernando Valley secession movement, though adequate, is presented here primarily as an impetus for charter reform; researchers interested in an in-depth study may be disappointed. Similarly, though Sonenshein raises interesting questions about civic participation among Latino immigrants, he ventures only superficial answers that are best supplemented by other recent studies.^[2]

By far the most interesting and unique aspect of this book derives from Sonenshein’s role as executive director of the appointed charter commission. He had access to the key players in Los Angeles politics, whose interviews form the backbone to this book. The study is peppered with Sonenshein’s candid interpretations of the people and events that influenced the outcomes of charter reform, secession, and municipal elections. The following excerpt is typical: “I have often thought since then that finding the high ground was the key to making charter reform succeed, but I had never really felt the high ground until that nineteen to zero vote. We had done the

right thing, and in so doing had restored the faith of the people in the room, and also outside it, that Los Angeles government could be reformed" (p. 166). Sonenshein's observations enable the reader to enter the often inaccessible world of city politics through a privileged and trusted insider's eye. Written in an accessible, engaging style, the study feels more like a memoir or political autobiography than a scholarly monograph. Together with his earlier study, *The City at Stake* is the definitive study of urban politics in Los Angeles.

Notes

[1]. Raphael Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[2]. Robert Gottlieb, Mark Vallianatos, Regina M. Freer, and Peter Dreier, *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005).

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Citation: Laura Barraclough. Review of Sonenshein, Raphael, *The City at Stake: Secession, Reform, and the Battle for Los Angeles*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

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