ABSTRACT: This article explores the politics of regional cooperation in Houston and in Los Angeles, focusing in particular on the role of the state in facilitating or inhibiting metropolitan-wide approaches to urban problems. In both California and Texas, the state can play a significant role in facilitating regional cooperation. However, important limits exist on the extent to which this happens. While generous annexation rules have facilitated regionalism in Houston, these rules are themselves only as strong as the political consensus to use and maintain them. Similarly, regional agencies in Los Angeles have been reluctant to fully utilize their powers in the face of strong political opposition from local governments. Finally, in both Houston and Los Angeles regionalism is more often defined in terms of systems maintenance functions rather than lifestyle functions. The use of state-level rules to promote regionalism may suffer from the same political liabilities as earlier attempts to form regional governments.

From “soccer moms” to Gore’s “Livability Agenda,” the political significance of suburbia has dominated much of the news reporting and political commentary of the last several election cycles. As the percentage of the United States population living in suburbs has grown from a quarter of the population in 1950 to the finding of the 1990 census that almost half of Americans live in suburbs, political analysts have increasingly concerned themselves with the political implications of suburban growth. With phrases like “the secession of the successful” and “the balkanization of America,” researchers have painted an increasingly gloomy portrait of a nation divided between decaying inner cities plagued by poverty and unemployment, and fortress suburbs engaged in “defensive localism”—the attempt to maintain their own standard of living while avoiding encroaching social problems (Frey, 1996; Reich, 1991; Weir, 1995). For those interested in the future of American cities, an increasingly important question is how to bridge the political boundaries that separate city and suburban communities.
The recent flood of interest in regional cooperation represents renewed rather than new interest. Political scientists in the 1960s and 1970s were similarly concerned with how to unite the mosaic of small governments that characterized many metropolitan areas. In most instances, their primary concern was efficiency (Wallis, 1994a). The existence of many small governments meant that local services were often needlessly duplicated and that service provision was more costly and unwieldy than if metropolitan-wide governments were created that could benefit from economies of scale. This argument was turned on its head by public choice theorists who argued that local government fragmentation actually produced more, not less, efficient policy outcomes (Ostrom, Tiebout, & Warren, 1961). A large number of local governments in a metropolitan area creates a market system in which local governments compete for their share of the region’s population. This competition drives them to offer tax and service levels that more closely correspond to the preferences of area residents. In the wake of this public choice critique and in the face of increasing evidence of the political infeasibility of creating metropolitan governments, interest in regionalism faded.

Interest in regionalism, however, resurfaced in the mid to late 1990s. As research underscored the increasing interconnectedness of the economic fortunes of city and suburbs in the same metropolitan area (e.g., Hill, Wolman, & Ford III, 1995; Savitch, Collins, Sanders, & Markham, 1992), the political separation of local jurisdictions appeared to intensify, renewing calls for the creation of more cooperative regional arrangements to better reflect common economic fortunes. Although metropolitan wide governments have been successfully created in a few instances, for example, Metro in Portland, Oregon (Lewis, 1996) and the Met Council in Minneapolis-St. Paul (Orfield, 1997), the consensus among the new wave of regionalists seems to be that because “Metropolitan government has almost no political support... Proposals to replace suburban governments completely are therefore doomed” (Downs, 1994, p. 170). Consequently, much of today’s discussion of regionalism focuses on alternatives to creating metropolitan governments—arrangements that facilitate regional cooperation but fall short of establishing a true metropolitan government.

This article assesses a number of the alternatives currently offered as politically feasible means to create a new regionalism. First, I analyze the answers these alternatives offer to such questions as “what makes city-suburb cooperation more or less likely within metropolitan areas and within particular states?” And, “what role can formal and informal means of coordination play in the development of a regional perspective among local political actors?” Then, to assess these answers, this article looks at the politics of regional cooperation in Houston and in Los Angeles, focusing in particular on the role of the state legislature in facilitating or inhibiting metropolitan-wide approaches to urban problems. Through an extensive review of the two main newspapers for these metropolitan areas, the Houston Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times, and through interviews with relevant state and local political elites (including state representatives/district coordinators for districts in the Houston and Los Angeles metropolitan areas, officials from the area’s official COG and from the regional chambers of commerce, and lobbyists for the city in the state capital), this article analyzes the impact of various state-level mechanisms for achieving regional cooperation. A list of the individuals interviewed in this study appears in Table 1.

I explore how state-level incentives are employed to build and maintain coalitions between cities and suburbs, and what factors enhance or inhibit the success of coalition building. The article finds that while in both California and Texas, the state can play an important role in facilitating regional cooperation, important limits exist on the extent to which this happens—limits which raise questions about the ability of the new approaches to regionalism to overcome the political liabilities of the old approach.
TABLE 1

Individuals Interviewed by Author

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<td>Scott Forbes, State and Federal Relations, Office of the Mayor</td>
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<td>Joseph C. Chow, Asst. Director Intergovernmental Relations, Planning and Development Department</td>
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<td>Jerry Wood, Deputy Assistant Director, Planning and Development Department</td>
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<td>John W. Jackson, Jr., Long Range Planning Division, Planning &amp; Development Department</td>
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<td>Madan L. Mangal, Long Range Planning Division, Planning &amp; Development Department</td>
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<td>Garnet Coleman, State Representative, District 147</td>
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<td>Peggy Hamric, State Representative, District 126</td>
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<td>Scott Hochberg, State Representative, District 132</td>
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<td>Joseph M. Nixon, State Representative, District 133</td>
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<td>Rick Noriega, State Representative, 145</td>
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<td>Jon Lindsay, State Senator, District 7 and Former Harris County Judge</td>
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<td>Robert Eckels, Harris County Judge</td>
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<td>Roger H. Hord, Vice President, Greater Houston Partnership</td>
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<td>Jack Steele, Executive Director, Houston-Galveston Area Council</td>
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<td>Frank E. Gutierrez, Operations Coordinator, Harris County Office of Emergency Management</td>
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<td>John M. Sediak, Vice President of Planning, Metropolitan Transit Authority</td>
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<td>Michael P. Karsch, Legislative Analyst, City of Los Angeles</td>
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<td>Karen Adams, 55th Assembly District Director for Richard E. Floyd</td>
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<td>Becki Ames, 53rd Assembly District Coordinator for George Nakano</td>
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<td>Edward L. Chavez, 57th Assembly District Coordinator for Martin Gallegos</td>
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<td>Marco Antonio Firebaugh, Assembly Member, 50th District</td>
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<td>Joe Giradello, 38th Assembly District Director for Tom McClintock</td>
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<td>Florence G. Guerrero, 51st Assembly District Director for Edward Vincent</td>
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<td>Brendan Hussman, 42nd Assembly District Director for Wally Knox</td>
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<td>Robert Pacheco, Assembly Member, 60th District</td>
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<td>Herb Wesson, Assembly Member, 47th District</td>
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<td>Jerry Jeffe, Legislative Manager, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce</td>
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<td>Charlie Woo, CEO of Megatoys</td>
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<td>Helene Smookler, Director of Government Affairs, Southern California Assoc. of Governments</td>
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MODELS OF COOPERATION

Analysts have developed various schemes for categorizing approaches to achieving cooperation across local government boundaries. For example, Bollens (1997) pinpoints five alternatives to metropolitan government for creating regional governance including functionally specific regional agencies, public-private alliances, and regionalism through state oversight/regulation. Following his negative assessment of the political support for metropolitan government, Downs (1994) describes seven possibilities for fostering regional approaches to growth related problems, many of which are similar to those described by Bollens. Another approach
is taken by Wallis (1994a, 1994b) who characterizes proposals for creating regionalism as falling into three successive phases with different metropolitan areas moving more or less quickly into each new phase. The first phase “stressed structural solutions, such as city-county consolidations,” while the second phase “focused on procedural reforms designed to improve program coordination and comprehensive planning” (1994a, p. 447). The current third phase is “led by coalitions of interest groups which are often cross-sectoral (non-profit, private and public). . . . focus on areas of substantive strategic concern . . . and . . . employ facilitated processes to develop a shared vision” (1994b, p. 447). And, in their introduction to a collection of essays on regional politics in various metropolitan areas around the country, Savitch and Vogel (1996), while also recognizing that metropolitan government is not the only way to realize regional cooperation, describe a more limited set of alternatives: interlocal agreements, public/private partnerships, and avoidance/conflict.

What is striking about many of these alternatives, however categorized, is the extent to which they involve action at the state level to facilitate local government support for regionalism. Rusk (1999) sums up the importance of state legislatures in this way: “State legislatures set the rules for local governments’ land use planning power . . . zoning powers . . . and intergovernmental agreements. The next decade’s battle must be fought in the statehouses” (p. 325). Indeed, state-level rules can shape the institutional context within which regional cooperation occurs. At the same time, however, these state level rules are themselves a function of state and regional politics. I discuss the potential role of state action in more detail in the sections that follow.

State-Level Rules

Methods for promoting regionalism which involve the state government setting the rules within which local decision-making will occur assume that particular institutional arrangements are more conducive to successful coalition building than others. The actions of local politicians committed to regional cooperation may be vitally important, but the institutional context within which they work will play an important role in either strengthening or weakening this commitment and in determining how much they are able to achieve. The role of institutions in shaping political outcomes has, of course, been an important topic in political science generally, particularly with the rise of new institutionalism approaches to political science (e.g., March & Olsen, 1984; Skocpol, 1992; Skowronek, 1982). In the field of urban politics more specifically, the significance of institutions—both organizations and rules of government—has been at the center of arguments about the determinants of local government patterns of representation, service provision, and taxation and spending (Clingermayer & Feiock, 1998; Morgan & Pelissero, 1980; Wolman, 1995). If institutional arrangements are important determinants of local government behavior because they help shape the preferences of political actors by altering opportunities and constraints on action, then it seems likely that institutional arrangements will also impact the willingness of political actors to cooperate across local government boundaries by altering the costs and incentives of such action.

One example of the way institutional arrangements may impact the likelihood of cooperation can be found in Rusk’s book, Cities Without Suburbs (1995). Utilizing the concept of elastic and inelastic cities, he distinguishes between those cities which have successfully harnessed the growth of surrounding communities to their own benefit and those that have failed to do so and are consequently experiencing social and economic decline. Rusk defines elasticity as a combination of the city’s density in 1950 and percentage of boundary expansion between 1950 and 1990. According to this measure, the key to increased elasticity is the ability to annex suburban growth occurring on the city’s rim. State rules that make annexation easier increase
city elasticity; state rules that deter annexation can hobble cities. The significance of state rules surrounding annexation has been a topic of some debate within the field of urban politics with questions centering on the extent to which variations in state rules actually affect the annexation-practices of local governments. A classic typology of state annexation laws distinguishes between states depending on where the approval for annexation rests—with the state legislature, local residents, the municipality, the state judiciary or an independent administrative agency—and this has been used to try to explain observed rates and amounts of annexation activity (Galloway & Landis, 1986; Liner, 1990; Sengstock, 1960). For those interested in regional cooperation, however, the question becomes not how does variation in state laws impact the internal politics of a particular municipality, but how does it impact the politics of cooperation across municipal boundaries.

In his analysis of the connection between inelasticity and urban decline, Rusk concerns himself primarily with social and economic indicators, arguing that increasing elasticity is associated with less segregation, lower poverty concentration, and greater overall economic progress. However, implicit in his argument is the idea that elasticity or inelasticity will also affect the political environment of metropolitan areas, making political cooperation more or less likely. If the challenge inherent in generating regional cooperation lies in convincing residents of suburban areas that they have a stake in the health of the central city, then elasticity should make this more readily achievable by making less tenable a strategy of separation and isolation. This will happen in two ways: first, by the fact that the city can literally end isolation by absorbing the suburban area and second, by forcing suburban areas to operate in an environment where separation is never guaranteed—the possibility that the city could annex the area changes the political environment of the region in important ways, regardless of whether annexation actually occurs. Under different annexation rules, the costs and benefits of cooperation are also different.

In addition to setting rules to make annexation easier (or secession more difficult), states can also impact the likelihood of regional cooperation through creating carrots or sticks to encourage local governments to work together on regional issues. States can do this by requiring the formation of regional entities, empowering them with planning authority and requiring that local governments comply with regional plans before they receive state or federal funds (stick) or by promising them extra funds if they participate in a regional planning process (carrot) (Wallis, 1994b). In addition, state government can enhance the power of existing regional entities by assigning them a key role in the distribution of local funds or in the development of state-mandated regional plans, and can create new regional entities charged with coordinating a particular function within regions (Bollens, 1997; Downs, 1994). One frequently cited example of the way this might work involves a federal law—the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act (ISTEA)—that is credited with strengthening regional approaches to transportation (Gage & McDowell, 1995). By requiring Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) to develop regional transportation plans and empowering them to decide which local transportation projects to fund in accordance with these plans, ISTEA strengthened regional planning in many metropolitan areas. Because transportation planning is also related to issues like air quality and growth management, the possibility exists for using this law to create a more comprehensive approach to many regional issues, not simply transportation (Downs, 1994; Fulton, 1997).

The Politics of Structure

At the same time as “new institutionalism” alerts us to the potential importance of state-rules for shaping local government behavior, the literature on institutions also suggests limits
to the ability of state-level rules to promote cooperation among local governments. While “on
the one hand, [political institutions] help mitigate collective-action problems,” they are also
“the structural means by which political winners pursue their own interests, often at the great
expense of political losers” (Moe, 1990, p. 213). Consequently, political institutions may be
less than effective because their formation is shaped by the same political conflict that they
are supposed to help alleviate. To the extent that the political actors creating the institution
are concerned about protecting and promoting different interests, this conflict will be re-
flected in the institutions that are created. In the words of Furubotn and Richter (1997) “the
distributional conflicts that are inherent in any [political] property-rights arrangement can . . .
block or critically constrain the institutional structure that can be adopted” (p. 110). This leads
Lowery (2000) to the conclusion that “the options of state or national intervention do not some-
how magically sidestep the same incentive problems that face consolidation as a solution to
the undersupply [of metropolitan-wide policies] problem” (p. 71). It also suggests that a focus
on the question of how state laws can promote regionalism requires answers to the question
of how laws to promote metropolitan-wide solutions to urban problems are enacted and
sustained—the “politics of structural choice” (Moe, 1990, p. 225).

REGIONALISM IN HOUSTON AND LOS ANGELES

In order to understand how these state-level strategies for promoting regionalism operate in
particular states and impact particular metropolitan areas, I compare the experiences of Hous-
ton and Los Angeles—their relationship with other local governments in the metropolitan area
and their ability to win legislative battles at the state level. The rationale for choosing Hous-
ton and Los Angeles is to compare two cities that face similar types of regional challenges but
operate within different state contexts. First, this comparison avoids the difficulties of trying
to compare newer Sunbelt cities with decaying Frostbelt cities. If, as Abbott (1987) suggests,
the Sunbelt is defined historically by “shared similarities of economic development and de-
mographic change,” then Los Angeles and Houston clearly qualify (p. 35). (In fact, Abbott
identifies California and Texas as the dominant states shaping the character of the Sunbelt-
West.) Both Houston and Los Angeles are among the most populous cities in the United States
and also among the fastest growing cities. Furthermore, they are similar in terms of the high
degree of racial and ethnic diversity in their population. A recent study commissioned by the
Houston area Chamber of Commerce described Houston’s population as “most closely resem-
bl[ing] that of Los Angeles—a sizable but declining Anglo segment, a stable African Ameri-
can proportion, and surging growth among Hispanics and Asian Americans” (Houston
Metropolitan Study, 1998, p. 26). Finally, Houston and Los Angeles also both have significant
immigrant populations as both cities are among the top ten destinations for immigrants enter-
ing the U.S. each year (City of Houston, 1996).

In addition, the Sunbelt may be a particularly instructive region in which to view the effec-
tiveness of state efforts at promoting metropolitan cooperation. The distinctive characteristics
of the Sunbelt states raise questions about “the extent to which this common growth experi-
ence over the last generation has produced common patterns and problems in local govern-
mental efforts to direct these powerful forces of metropolitan growth” (Abbott, 1987, p. 262).
Abbott (1987) identifies three distinct periods in the history of metropolitan relations in the
Sunbelt: “the politics of urban initiative, the politics of city-suburban conflict, and the politics
of community independence” (p. 247). Furthermore, he suggests that the challenge facing the
Sunbelt in the face of suburban separation from the city is whether “before the current pattern
of intrametropolitan parochialism or conflict becomes a permanent habit, Sunbelt cities can
continue to seek the institutions and the leadership to build true metropolitan communities”
This article addresses these issues in the context of the state’s role in promoting true metropolitan communities and evaluates the possibility of a fourth period of Sunbelt metropolitan relations, state-induced cooperation.

**Rules: Annexation and Secession**

A comparison of how statutes regarding annexation have impacted the relationship between local governments in the Houston and Los Angeles metropolitan areas illustrates both the power and the weakness of this particular category of state rules. State laws surrounding annexation make it relatively easy for Texas cities to engage in annexation—annexation can be initiated by the city council and does not require approval by voters in the proposed area (Rusk, 1995). The lack of a requirement for voter approval is what gives Houston’s annexation power real teeth. In addition to annexation, Houston was also able to successfully utilize its home charter powers to “thwart the emergence of municipal rivals in the region” (Houston Metropolitan Study, 1998, p. 131). This ability to absorb significant portions of the area population growth and to remain the most significant local government in the region helped Houston take the lead in addressing regional issues (R. Hord, personal interview, July 23, 1999; Houston Metropolitan Study, 1998, p. 131). The problem of bridging the political divide between city and suburb was solved by the fact that little divide existed—much suburban growth was captured within the boundaries of the center city, and suburban growth that occurred outside the central city boundary took place in a context in which residents foresaw annexation as a strong possibility and also saw little difference between themselves and the residents of the city (Houston Metropolitan Study, 1988).

Houston’s strong annexation powers, and limits on the ability of surrounding areas to incorporate, ease the task of regionalism by reducing the number of local jurisdictions involved. As a result, Houston’s interests remain at the forefront of regional discussions. However, Houston’s most recent significant annexation, Kingwood, demonstrates both why strong annexation powers can help sustain the economic health of a city and the limits on this strategy once political acceptance of the city’s right to annex begins to disappear. A “relatively affluent, non-minority-dominated residential area north of the city,” the Kingwood annexation represents city acquisition of the type of suburban population that in more troubled metropolitan areas remains outside the city boundaries and tax authority (Harris et al. v. City of Houston, 1998). The reaction of Kingwood residents to their annexation, however, was strongly negative—they marched on the state legislature, persuaded sympathetic legislators to file de-annexation bills, and brought a case in federal court (which was eventually dismissed) (Preston, 1997; Williams, 1997a). Without any diminution in the legal ability to annex, the strength of political opposition to large scale annexation exhibited by Kingwood residents seems likely to curb Houston’s land acquisition in the foreseeable future. At the moment, the way to preserve Houston’s annexation power appears to be by refraining from using it. In fact, a recent *Houston Chronicle* (“Shared Destiny,” 1998) editorial argues “it is more important for Houston to keep its powers of annexation and extraterritorial jurisdiction than for it to actually annex more territory” (p. 2). The editorial suggests that much of the power of annexation lies in threat rather than action. For example, it provides a disincentive to businesses to leave the city for the surrounding suburbs, as these suburbs may in turn become part of the city. And, if they attract a significant amount of development, they could become even more attractive targets for annexation.

Furthermore, in the wake of the Kingwood opposition, Mayor Lanier began recommending that the city slow down in its attempts to annex other areas and began supporting legislation at the state level which would provide for alternative mechanisms of cooperation between city and suburban areas (Williams, 1997b; Preston, 1997). In 1999, legislation modifying Hous-
ton’s annexation powers was enacted with the approval of those on both sides of the issue. City officials were happy that they retained the ability to annex areas in their extra-territorial jurisdiction without a vote of approval from the residents of the area. At the same time, opponents of annexation are pleased that the city is required to announce annexation plans three years in advance and that more opportunities for negotiation between the unincorporated areas and the city, as well as possible alternatives to annexation, are created (City of Houston, 1999; S. Forbes, personal interview, July 19, 1999). Representatives of both the city and unincorporated areas agree that this legislation goes a long way toward repairing relations in the metropolitan area and allowing state representatives to cooperate on other issues (G. Coleman, personal interview, July 20, 1999; S. Forbes, personal interview, July 19, 1999; P. Hamric, personal interview, July 22, 1999; J. Lindsey, personal interview, July 22, 1999). For the city, repairing relations was seen as particularly important because of increasing suburban strength in the state legislature.

It’s kind of a key time right now to try and get along with the suburbs before they have complete control . . . A suburban controlled legislature will look at urban issues and be focused on them. The key right now is to get them focused in a positive way, not a negative way. I think Senate Bill 89 [annexation reform] helped us a lot in that it was a positive step where compromise was had. Not all the cities were on board but for our part we were. If the suburban areas address urban issues on a negative scale, we’re going to lose and there’s nothing we can really do to stop that. And that would be devastating to Houston (S. Forbes, personal interview, July 19, 1999).

While this law does somewhat weaken the annexation powers of Houston, it creates strong incentives for on-going negotiations between the center city government and suburban areas over a common vision of development in the region.

The situation in Los Angeles has been quite different. Despite some annexation in the 1920s and 1930s, Los Angeles’ boundaries grew relatively little after this time (Rusk, 1995). The requirement that a majority of voters in the affected area must agree to annexation makes annexation politically difficult in Los Angeles. This requirement effectively prohibits the center city from annexing surrounding communities—unless they can offer an overwhelming inducement to do so. In the past, access to water rights was a powerful inducement, but in the current period, the city controls no comparable incentive. In fact, the incentives in California seem increasingly to have been operating in the opposite direction with the result that incorporation of new cities rather than expansion of existing cities has characterized the local government landscape. For example, with the development of the Lakewood Plan in the 1950s, newly incorporated cities no longer needed to assume responsibility for services formerly provided by the county. Cities could continue to receive fire and police protection from the county but pay a fee for whatever level of protection they felt they needed and could afford. In this way, unincorporated areas could incorporate without having to find the money to develop their own police and fire forces and could take advantage of the savings offered by the county’s ability to achieve an economy of scale (Miller, 1981).

A second obstacle to city incorporation was removed in the 1970s with the passage of Proposition 13, which cut property tax levels and severely limited subsequent increases. Before the passage of Proposition 13, incorporation proposals were often defeated because residents feared that a new city would increase property taxes by placing their own tax on top of that already charged by the county. However under this property tax limitation, the sharing of property tax revenue among county and local government became a zero-sum game—the overall property tax level paid by residents could not increase when a new layer of local government
was added (California Assembly Office of Research, 1989). In the decade immediately following the passage of Proposition 13, 32 new cities were incorporated in California—double the amount in the previous decade (California Assembly Office of Research, 1989). These new cities were primarily suburban areas with relatively fewer racial minorities and low-income residents than the central city of the area. Their creation meant loss of revenue for the county governments, which provide services to unincorporated areas in California, and the addition of another small government to be reckoned with in the regional mix.

The latest development in Los Angeles city-suburb relations involves secession rather than incorporation but also has the same end goal of creating additional local government. A movement is underway in the San Fernando Valley to break away from the city of Los Angeles and become an independent city—the nation’s sixth largest if the movement succeeds (Booth, 1998). This secession movement was also assisted by another state-level rule change that seems destined to make the process of breaking away from existing cities easier to accomplish—much as the Lakewood Plan and Proposition 13 made incorporation easier to achieve. In October 1997, Governor Wilson signed into law a bill that eliminated the power of city councils to veto secession attempts. Popularly labeled the “Valley Secession Bill,” this legislation was seen as a victory for secession proponents in the San Fernando Valley and was strongly supported by state legislators of both parties representing areas of the Valley. Wilson signed the bill into law despite strong objections from cities around the state who “argued that the elimination of city councils’ veto power over secession attempts would give rise to a wholesale severing of suburban communities from their urban cores” (Chu, 1997; Hill-Holtzman, 1997, p. A1). The law actually overturned an earlier piece of legislation from the 1970s that said that cities had the power to veto secession, an attempt to protect San Jose, which was facing the threat of secession at the time (Hill-Holtzman, 1997). This seems to demonstrate that institutional arrangements are only as strong as the political will to use or maintain them.

The secession movement in the San Fernando Valley still has a long way to go. One important hurdle was recently cleared when the group spearheading the movement collected enough signatures of Valley residents to require a formal study of the feasibility of secession. Important hurdles remain, however, including decisions about how to fund the study; how to convince the panel studying secession (Local Agency Formation Commission) that the San Fernando Valley is viable as a city and that its loss will not significantly harm Los Angeles; and if this succeeds, how to win majority support in elections in the Valley and the city as a whole (Belluck, 1998; Bustillo & McGreevy, 1999). However, regardless of the ultimate success of the secession movement, it does mean for the near future that the major city in the region is focused on preserving its existing boundaries, rather than on forming cross-boundary alliances. One major response to the secession push has been city charter reform with the idea that giving outlying communities more representation within the city governance structure will make them less determined to separate from the existing city (Martin, 1998; Newton, 1999; Purdum, 1999; Willon, 1998). Again, the trend seems to be movement toward greater recognition of the interests of the parts rather than movement toward recognition of the interest of the whole as something other than the sum of these parts.

Rules: Regional Agencies

While state annexation rules indirectly impact the relationship between local governments in a metropolitan area, the formation of regional agencies seeks to shape more directly the relationship. These agencies can include single purpose agencies (like Metro in Houston and the MTA in Los Angeles—both dealing with transportation) or more general purpose agencies. Much of this analysis focuses on these more comprehensive regional agencies, but I also
consider the role of single-purpose agencies. In Los Angeles, the Council of Regional Governments (COG) is the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) and in Houston, the COG is the Houston-Galveston Area Council (HGAC). These organizations are voluntary associations of local governments created with the idea of bringing local government officials together to work on issues of region-wide concern. Their creation in the 1960s was in response to federal and state concerns about how localities would spend money passed down to them from higher levels of government—as such their creation can be seen as an early example of the way in which state/federal rules influence regionalism. On the other hand, their creation also demonstrates the first signs of weakness in this particular approach to regionalism because the agreement to form these COGs in metropolitan areas was often motivated by a sense that for local government this was a relatively low-cost alternative to what the state or federal government might otherwise impose in the form of regional governing structures.

The voluntary nature of the membership in these associations continues to impact the kind of role they are able to play in dealing with regional issues. In describing the importance of consensus-building around any decisions that have to be made, the executive director of HGAC underscored the extent to which their “basic constituency is the elected leadership in each of [the member] local governments, and so we tend to reflect the policy priorities in our fields of endeavor of those elected officials.” Because HGAC can only “do what our members want us to do. . . . the organization has . . . evolved a very strong consensus decision-making practice policy” (J. Steele, personal interview, July 21, 1999). While HGAC characterizes this need for consensus as both a strength and a weakness, critics of SCAG in Los Angeles depict the restrictions placed on these organizations by their voluntary nature as primarily negative: “because it was a voluntary union, SCAG’s primary mission always had to be retention of membership. If [the executive director] pushed too hard, the cities might quit, further eroding SCAG’s credibility” (Fulton, 1997, p. 159). At various times, Orange County and Ventura County, for example, wanted to break away from SCAG and pressed for federal legislation to make it easier for them to form their own Metropolitan Planning Organizations (H. Smookler, personal interview, July 26, 1999). In fact, to be responsive to the concerns of local governments in the region, SCAG expanded the membership on its governing board from 20 to 70 and also created subregions which receive some funding to do bottom-up planning which is then passed on to SCAG to be incorporated in region-wide plans (Bollens, 1997; H. Smookler, personal interview, July 26, 1999). On the one hand, involvement in these regional agencies may encourage local officials to begin to adopt a more regional perspective (H. Smookler, personal interview, July 26, 1999). On the other hand, because the members of these regional organizations are electorally accountable to local rather than regional constituents and because they have the option to withdraw if they do not approve of the actions of the council, COGs may have difficulties making the difficult trade-offs and distributing the local costs that a commitment to regionalism often requires. A recent report by the Commission on Local Governance for the 21st Century made the same point in relation to the potential role of Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCOs) in generating regional plans in California. In order for this to happen, “LAFCO members need to adopt a comprehensive perspective on governance and not simply represent the parochial views of their appointing agencies” (California Commission on Local Governance for the 21st Century, 2000, p. 43). Again, as long as organizations are composed of members who do not represent a regional constituency, true regional policies will be difficult to achieve and enforce.

This again is where state rulemaking enters the picture. To the extent that the state government assigns important planning functions to these regional agencies, the incentive for local governments to stay involved in the organization grows. Withdrawing from the COG means losing the ability to have input into these regional plans. In Texas, for example, HGAC is charged
with developing the region’s transportation plan, coordinating and funding work force programs, water quality programs, senior citizen programs, and ensuring that the region is in compliance with federal air quality standards (J. Steele, personal interview, July 21, 1999). Similarly, SCAG is charged with developing the region’s transportation plan, determining conformity with clean air standards, developing waste treatment plans, assessing environmental impact reports for regionally significant projects and determining local government’s share of regional housing needs (SCAG, 1998). To the extent that these planning functions are accompanied by power over the distribution of state and federal funds, the ability of the COG to bring local government actions into line with regional approaches to particular issues obviously increases. Again, this is most obvious on the issue of transportation. Localities have a strong incentive to care about the outcome of regional planning processes if their ability to receive state and federal funds for road construction depends on their ability to demonstrate to SCAG that this project fits within the parameters of the regional plan. Not surprisingly, when asked what area represented their greatest success in regional planning terms, both HGAC and SCAG said transportation planning (R. Hord, personal interview, July 23, 1999; H. Smookler, personal interview, July 26, 1999; J. Steele, personal interview, July 21, 1999).

Furthermore, once regional agencies possess these powers, some observers argue that a single-purpose mandate can be interpreted in such a way as to require involvement in a broader array of issues than originally conceived. While not a single-purpose agency, the way in which authority over a particular function can potentially be leveraged into a broader regional mandate is illustrated by SCAG’s use of its regional transportation planning function. Arguing for the interconnectedness of regional issues, SCAG attempted to use Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act funds to develop a comprehensive regional plan that would deal not only with transportation but also with such issues as water, human resources, and growth management (Fulton, 1997, pp. 168–173). Similarly, the Southern California Air Quality Management District (AQMD) attempted to use its mandate of ensuring regional compliance with state and federal clean air regulations to regulate a broader array of behaviors that ultimately impact air quality such as travel patterns and land use decisions (Bollens, 1997).

However, the limits of this strategy are clearly in evidence. In the face of opposition from member local governments, SCAG was forced to divide the comprehensive plan between core chapters which closely adhere to SCAGs state/federal mandates in the area of transportation planning and solid waste management and ancillary chapters which deal with such contentious issues as land use decisions and which local governments are under no requirement to incorporate into their own planning (Fulton, 1997). Similarly, AQMD bowed to political pressure to abandon its more controversial policies such as requiring local governments to develop plans to coordinate job/housing locations in order to cut down on commute times. In addition, both SCAG and AQMD possess powers to enforce local government compliance with aspects of their plans which they have to date been reluctant to use because of the anticipated political outcry (M. Karsch, personal interview, July 30, 1999). If the political will to deal with certain issues on a regional rather than local basis does not exist, regional agencies, despite the authority given them by state or federal government, will find it difficult to introduce far-reaching policies. This is particularly true when the regional agencies in question are composed of representatives of existing local governments rather than independently elected representatives of the region.

The difficulties for these regional agencies of overcoming political opposition from local governments is also illustrated by the arguments offered to explain the greater success of regional cooperation around transportation planning in comparison to other policy areas. In the words of the executive director of HGAC, cooperation on transportation issues is easier to achieve because “everybody is for improved mobility so there is that fundamental underlying
consensus” (J. Steele, personal interview, July 21, 1999). Transportation planning may be contentious to the extent that local interests are competing for a limited pool of transportation funds, but the benefits to local government are seen as clearly outweighing the costs, and transportation planning is not seen as requiring the same loss of local decision-making authority that regional planning in other areas sometimes seems to demand. The communications and government affairs director at SCAG makes this argument when she points out the desire of the newly created subregions to have jurisdiction over transportation planning but not over the housing needs assessment plan.

We supported state legislation which allows [subregions] to do a lot of the negotiation in terms of what needs to go in the housing needs assessment. What’s interesting, we have 14 subregions and this is really empowerment to them, but only 5 of the subregions will take the delegation to do the work themselves . . . . They want the safe money; they want to say we’re doing our own truck lane study . . . but on the other hand when it’s something controversial, SCAG, you do it (H. Smookler, personal interview, July 26, 1999).

Sensing that the political costs outweigh any benefits, they prefer to leave this more controversial planning in the hands of SCAG rather than assuming responsibility for it themselves.

In contrast to transportation, both HGAC and SCAG express concerns about the extent to which regional cooperation can be sustained in dealing with the issue of air quality. Houston is currently second after Los Angeles in having the worst air quality in the country. As the region risks falling out of compliance with federal clean air standards, and consequently losing access to federal transportation funds, the HGAC worries about the ability of the region to respond to this challenge because “the region has [not] yet come to a firm conclusion about the economic value of clean air . . . . [and] the cost of clean air improvement tends to fall disproportionately on various groups” (J. Steele, personal interview, July 21, 1999). Similarly, as the Los Angeles area also risks falling out of conformity with clean air standards, placing SCAG in the position of telling localities and transportation commissions that they cannot implement particular projects, Smookler expects regional cooperation and support for SCAG to suffer (H. Smookler, personal interview, July 26, 1999).

Downs (1994) may be correct that it is easier to generate political support for single purpose agencies rather than more comprehensive regional entities because they create less fear about loss of autonomy among local governments. However, the examples of SCAG’s involvement with transportation, AQMD’s with air quality, and concerns in both regions about clean air standards illustrate that to the extent dealing with a single issue begins to require substantial restrictions on local government decision-making, political support may quickly evaporate.

Another issue that is relevant in evaluating the success of these regional agencies in facilitating cooperation across local government boundaries is the extent to which this cooperation incorporates the interests of both center city and suburban governments. In recognition of their large regional population share, the cities of Houston and Los Angeles both have greater representation in HGAC and SCAG, respectively. At the same time, however, the large number of other governments with representation in these agencies ensures that this is not enough to allow the center cities to dominate. While this may give the regional planning process more legitimacy in the eyes of suburban local governments, it may create reluctance on the part of the center cities to participate fully in the regional planning process, either because they think this suburban-dominated forum is not a good place for getting their interests heard or because they see the agency as largely irrelevant to the kinds of issues that concern center cities (Houston Metropolitan Study, 1998; M. Karsch, personal interview, July 30, 1999; H. Smookler, personal interview, July 26, 1999).
Overall, HGAC seems to play a less controversial role in the Houston region than SCAG plays in the Los Angeles region. In part, this may again illustrate the point that regional agencies are acceptable to local governments to the extent that they do not require a significant loss of local government autonomy—i.e., that they do not really represent a regional government but more a regional forum for local government. This difference is apparent in the way that the mission of HGAC is described in comparison to that of SCAG. The HGAC is careful to describe itself as at the service of its local government members with the goal of “assisting local governments today while helping them plan for tomorrow” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 1998a; J. Steele, personal interview, July 21, 1999). In the brief official history on the organization’s web site, HGAC stresses that while “the Texas Legislature and the Governor had acted to encourage the formation of regional councils of local governments in the State . . . H-GAC was formed entirely on the initiative of local elected officials” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 1998b). In contrast, SCAG seems to assert a regional identity that is more than simply the sum of its member local governments. This regional identity is clear in the description of its mission—“leadership, vision and progress which promote economic growth, personal well-being and livable communities for all Southern Californians”—and the description of the role that local governments play in its planning process—“SCAG places great importance on local input in the regional planning process . . . [and] SCAG works hard to ensure that local concerns are addressed in regional policies” (SCAG, 1998, p. 5).

The more narrow and technical mission of the HGAC seems to fit with a history of planning in Houston that has generally involved a fairly small level of government regulation (Feagin, 1988; Houston Metropolitan Study, 1998). For example, when discussing various land uses that require planning permission, officials from the city’s planning department argued that:

Now, there is very little in a sense of what the city can do to stop [someone] . . . We’re not going in there to say “oh no, you need to redo this entirely just because we want to. This is not Portland, we’re not doing that kind of stuff....We’re an industry friendly department it is safe to say (J. Woods, personal interview, July 19, 1999).

Asked whether the issue of zoning was likely to figure in upcoming state legislative sessions, a city lobbyist predicted: “Not for years. Not for another decade at least. We’ve had three votes on it now and none of them came close. We’re the largest city in America without zoning and Houstonians tend to say that with pride” (S. Forbes, personal interview, July 19, 1999). To the extent that unwillingness to cede control over local land-use decisions is often one of the most contentious issues in regional planning, the sense that much of the control over land-use planning already rests largely in private rather than governmental hands must also surely alter the political meaning and contentiousness of regionalism in Houston. Again, this underscores the point that the political success of regional planning agencies may be dependent on their relative weakness as regional entities.

CONCLUSION

This comparison of regionalism in the metropolitan areas of Houston and Los Angeles demonstrates several ways in which states can facilitate regional cooperation. States create rules that structure the local decision-making environment. To the extent that these rules create incentives for local politicians to consider not only the local but also the regional implications of their actions and to the extent that they make more visible the shared fortunes of city and suburban localities within a metropolitan area, they improve the prospects for regional cooperation.
However, this comparison also reveals important limitations on the ability of the state to foster increased regional cooperation at the local level. In large part this has to do with the fact that any rule is only as strong as the political will to maintain it. For example, in the case of Houston, increased suburban opposition to the idea that suburban communities can be absorbed into the city boundaries at the behest of the Houston City Council combined with increasing suburban clout at the statehouse to limit Houston’s ability to continue engaging in aggressive annexation. Strong annexation powers are increasingly used as part of an informal strategy of coordination, providing incentives for voluntary cooperation, rather than as a means of creating a center city, which is also the dominant metro-level government. Similarly, in the face of stiff political opposition from local governments in the Los Angeles area, SCAG and AQMD have been reluctant to fully utilize their powers to promote a comprehensive regional vision.

Furthermore, earlier state rules create outcomes that impact the current ability of regions to cooperate. In Texas, this has worked to Houston’s advantage because earlier state rules helped limit the number of local governments now demanding a seat at the regional table. In California, on the other hand, earlier rules about annexation and incorporation complicated the regional picture in Los Angeles by encouraging the formation of a large number of discrete local interests. The sheer size and diversity of the interests in the Los Angeles region make cooperation difficult.

Finally, the difficulties faced by regional organizations when they move away from an issue like transportation and become involved in land-use planning suggest that the argument developed by Williams (1967) still holds: regional cooperation is more easily achieved when dealing with systems maintenance functions rather than with life style functions. State rule making as an alternative way to bridge local government boundaries may ultimately suffer from the same problem as attempts to create metropolitan government. As long as strong political support for regionalism does not exist among residents of metropolitan areas, and as long as strong incentives to build the political support do not exist among politicians, regional cooperation will remain extraordinarily difficult to achieve on all but a handful of issues.

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