

The American Approach to Regionalism: Unifunctional and Technocratic

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Despite the numerous articles, analyses, conferences, and renewed state interest relating to substate regionalism, there are only a few signs that we have really departed from the traditional unifunctional approach to resolving multijurisdictional problems. So why all this renewed interest?

Some Reasons

The reasons for this reawakened attention are rooted in some very real existing substate regional difficulties—some are ongoing, some are new. One reason is the persistent fiscal squeeze on many localities stemming from the severe cuts since 1982 in direct federal aid directed to multijurisdictional problems. Earlier reductions in state aid—save for educational assistance—and the lingering effects of the recent recession in many areas also are part of this fiscal conditioner. Another factor for the renewed attention is the growing incidence of education-related court cases involving financing or integration that suggest possible regional solutions. A third reason is the successful record of certain new approaches to regional transportation, other infrastructure, and environmental challenges. Another is a cluster of recent developments in local regional economies, especially their involvement in the great game of

global competition. A final reason is the documented, hence increasingly understood, economic interdependence of suburbs and central cities. These and other developments then have combined to generate a resurgence of attention to substate regional issues, but little has emerged out of this reawakening regarding new institutional approaches that are politically feasible.

What Kinds of Regional Forms?

One recent typology listed 17 different forms of substate regionalism. They were classified according to the degree of difficulty in political attainment. Eight mostly procedural approaches like interlocal contracts, joint powers agreements, and nonthreatening institutions like regional councils were subsumed under the “not difficult” to implement group. A middle cluster involved four institutional approaches such as local or regional special districts and a pair of fairly politically-tough procedural approaches to resolving regional and servicing problems, those of annexation and transfer of functions. These six from the middle cluster, in fact, do affect the ordering of governance in substate regions albeit in largely a nonconfrontational way. Finally, the rare

examples of one-tier, two-tier, and three-tier metropolitan reorganizations constituted the most arduous but effective approach to resolving metropolitan financing, servicing, and policy challenges. In terms of usage, voluntary procedural approaches are preferred to mandated procedural approaches, all procedural are favored over the institutional, and among the institutional devices, regional councils are the most popular.

The Dominant American Approach: Unifunctional

When all of these methods for modifying regional governance patterns are analyzed on the basis of whether a specific purpose thrust is adopted or a general or multipurpose one, clearly the former is the overwhelming winner! The latter has produced *only*: (1) over 20 city-county consolidations; (2) one clear-cut two-tier reform (Miami-Dade County) along with several de facto city-county collaborative arrangements; (3) two three-tier reforms (the Twin Cities' Metropolitan Council and Portland's Metropolitan Service District, —and perhaps an emerging one in metropolitan Seattle); (4) about 105 fully-reformed urban counties; (5) over 600 Councils of Governments; and (6) 12 cities that by significant annexations have created de facto metropolitan governments. For many reasons, this is a record that should not be scorned. The development of most of these approximately 750 cases required a reshuffling if not a total reorganization of virtually all, if not all, regional governance arrangements in each area; and it was a reshuffling that for most cases was not mandated. Yet, it still is a comparatively modest achievement, constituting a modest portion of the regional reform record. In numerical terms, the procedural and institutional unifunctional approaches, not the multipurpose generalist one, win hands down.

But why? There are several obvious factors for this, some of which were hinted at in a few of the above paragraphs. Most but not all of the many devices covered by this single purpose label are voluntarily entered into. The servicing purpose is usually relatively noncontroversial and frequently relates to a "hardware" function not a "software" or people-related one. Some large metropolitan special authorities, however, are exceptions to this generalization, since they are controversial. The unifunctional approach generally reflects an incremental method of solving a servicing problem, while the multifunctional method usually incorporates a full-blown rational mode of decision-making. In terms of threats to the status quo, nearly all of the arrangements and agencies that result from using single purpose devices do not directly menace the fragmented jurisdictional status quo in most regions; hence the jurisdictional life of existing local governments and the political life of their officials remain safe. In fact, some of the devices like contracts, transfers, and even local special authorities may even strengthen their status and authority.

But the explosive growth of subregional and regional special districts, while obviously meeting in a pragmatic way multijurisdictional servicing needs, does pose an indirect, if not direct, threat to the generalist character of local governments. In some cases, the special district subregional services delivery could have been handled by a county, but was not. The 362 big regional authorities in urban and rural regions and the 2,167 large subregional districts in these same areas in 1990 are in fact the most numerous type of regional governments we have. They are a cause for careful local government attention and concern given both their special approach to being accountable and their impact on regional growth patterns.

Conclusion

Even the public choice (“the more service problems, the merrier”) advocates now admit that a regional monopoly service provider should be subject to some sort of regional or state supervision. The absence of an authoritative areawide power in the vast majority of our 284 metro regions, and even more rural ones, suggests that the presumed programatism of the fragmented pattern of governance in most regions and the political popularity of using unifunctional approaches to providing multijurisdictional services may in the short run en-

hance the governance capacity in such regions. But what over time happens to the concept of multipurpose cities and counties? Equally important, who but the state can serve as the judicial and political umpire in conflicts that arise in such jurisdictionally rich regions. In the long run this fragmented, unifunctional strategy does not add up to a long-term formula for strong local governments. ■

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