



On Clinton, Obama, Trump and the Failures of Liberal Urban Policy

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Many progressives are still in shock at the outcome of the recent US presidential election. In this contribution to the “Debates” section of Metropolitics, James DeFilippis advances a policy-based explanation for anemic voter turnout in key Democratic cities.

In the closing days of the seemingly endless 2016 US presidential campaign, it became increasingly clear to political observers that Hillary Clinton was explicitly adopting a platform of continuity with President Barack Obama’s administration.¹ This interpretation is helpful in understanding Donald Trump’s victory despite earning *fewer* votes than Mitt Romney did when he lost the presidential election in 2012. While turnout figures are still being analyzed, early estimates suggest that the decline in voter turnout was particularly pronounced in swing state cities; Hillary Clinton’s margin of victory in Detroit was 70,000 votes smaller than Obama’s margin of victory in 2012. Those 70,000 votes by themselves constitute over five times the margin of victory for Donald Trump (12,000 votes) in Michigan.² Similar drop-offs were reported in Cleveland and Toledo in Ohio,³ and Milwaukee in Wisconsin.⁴

Why did Democrats in these cities not come out to vote? Before addressing this, I want to make a few things clear. First, analysts are invoking many factors to explain Trump’s victory. I do not claim to understand why it happened. Given the surprising outcome, clarity is probably not possible at this point. Second, it is probably true that a plethora of factors explains Trump’s win; no single story is likely to be *the* explanation. I am therefore not making a casual argument that “because of uninspiring urban policies under liberal Democrats, Donald Trump won the election.” Third, and importantly, blaming Obama for the election’s outcome would be both unfair to the President and far too easy. This essay is meant to be read instead as a critique of the Democrats’ urban-policy frameworks for the last 25 years. It is a critique of these frameworks’ smallness and uninspiringness, and of their contribution to a withering of the organizational infrastructure necessary for more equitable and progressive urban life. That critique, which many academics have leveled for some time, has found some validation in the significant decline of voter turnout in core urban areas in this election (and in the 2012 election as well, relative to the 2008 election).

So why did urban turnout fall so dramatically? The short answer is that residents of urban areas were not given enough to vote for. The policies of Obama since 2008, like those of the Clintons in the 1990s, have had little to say or do about the situations in so many poor and de-industrialized cities.

In a 2013 article in the journal *Housing Policy Debate*, Dan Immergluck described the federal response to the foreclosure crisis as “Too little, too late, and too timid.” (p. 199). I believe that

¹ See: www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-11-06/trump-eyeing-clinton-s-midwest-bedrock-for-last-stretch-pickups.

² See: www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/opinion/what-i-got-wrong-about-the-election.html.

³ See: www.cleveland.com/datacentral/index.ssf/2016/11/mapping_the_ohio_presidential.html.

⁴ See: www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/9/13573904/voter-turnout-2016-donald-trump.

assessment describes the overall thrust of Obama’s urban-policy regime, not just its response to the foreclosure crisis it was facing when Obama took office in 2009.

The administration pushed little pilot projects with small pots of money when bolder action was demanded by the challenges of our time. This was even true in the face of the uprisings in urban areas from Ferguson to Baltimore—uprisings that made it clear that America’s urban policies had been failing to respond to multiple injustices affecting urban residents, particularly people of color.

The administration was also too late, in that—with the exception of the Affordable Care Act (or “Obamacare”)—it did not push an agenda to help cities until the last quarter of its time in power. At that point, there was little chance of any legislative victory, since the Republicans controlled both houses of Congress. And it was too timid because it didn’t trust the mobilization that got it into power in 2008. Rather than calling on the swell of youthful, racially diverse urban progressivism that swept it into office to help push for larger-bore urban policies, the administration let this incipient movement wither and die. All that organizing energy was squandered. The demobilization of the most progressive elements of Obama’s electoral coalition undermined the potential for an urban-policy regime dedicated to pursuing equity in addition to growth and committed to enabling the vitality of organizations (unions and community organizations) necessary for durable progressive urban governance.

Despite the talk of change that animated the 2008 election campaign, the largest theme of urban policy under Obama is continuity with past policies. To some extent, this is to be expected. It is a built-in feature of both the American constitution and the political institutions and organizations that constitute the realm of formal policymaking in this country. But given both the magnitude of the foreclosure and economic crises and the dramatic character of Obama’s election, the extent of the policy continuities (and the logics that inform them) is notable, and frankly, lamentable.

This continuity is evident in several ways. First, and most important, is the reliance on the market to solve urban social problems. Whether it is a lack of public-sector resources—itsself a product of political decisions—or a genuine belief that (individualized) market logics are inherently superior to (more collectivized) state logics is not the point here. Instead, it is simply the case that the market has been normalized as the framework through which elected officials and their executives make, understand and implement urban policies. We see this in myriad ways. In urban education policy, the principles have been market competition, individual “choice” (in the form of vouchers), and privatization (in the form of support for charter schools). In housing and community development policies we see a reliance on private financing and nonprofit service providers in the Obama administration’s Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI)⁵ and other efforts to respond to deferred capital investment in public housing. The very logics and values that inform social intervention have shifted; instead of looking to the market as a tool with which to intervene in social problems, we now consider interventions in terms of their ability to attract market investors.

Second, and relatedly, the chosen interventions have favored owners of capital over the people they were nominally designed to help. For example, the Administration’s efforts to assist struggling homeowners facing foreclosure were anemic in contrast to their Herculean feats to get financial capital healthy again. In many cities and communities, the beneficiaries of the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP)⁶ were more likely to be local real-estate investors than actual communities of working-class or poor people (Oakley and Fraser 2016).

Related to this, the urban policies pursued by the administration were largely ineffective in stemming increasing income and wealth inequalities. This is particularly the case with labor policy—which is properly understood as urban policy, even if it is not often discussed as such. Organized labor brought one major agenda item to the Obama administration: the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). EFCA may or may not have been a vehicle large enough to revitalize labor, but it is nearly

⁵ Website: www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/cn.

⁶ Website: www.hudexchange.info/programs/nsp.

impossible to imagine greater equity, or the institutional and organizational frameworks to support progressive policies, in our urban areas without renewed strength in the labor movement.

Third, the Obama administration has continued relying on community-based nonprofit organizations to execute urban policies. This is part of the larger contracting-out of the welfare state that has been such a dominant feature of American social policy since the 1980s, and in some fields of urban policy going back even further in time. Housing affordability, for instance, is achieved through subsidy to the private sector (both nonprofit and for-profit). The Choice Neighborhoods Initiative relies not just on private financing, but on a set of wraparound services provided by nonprofit organizations. The administration grabbed onto the Harlem Children's Zone (with its nonprofit-run charter school and other services meant to get children "from crib to college") as the model for its Promise Neighborhoods Initiative.⁷ And the administration's signature place-based policy—the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, and the work that would come out of it (i.e. the Sustainable Communities Initiative and the Strong Cities, Strong Communities program)—was implemented by local nonprofits. The problem with this is that the capacity of nonprofits varies a great deal, and a welfare state that depends upon them will be necessarily patchwork and uneven. It also must be noted that this former community organizer turned politician invested no money in community organizing on any real scale. Community organizations got money, but they did so to provide services or build housing, not to build political power. It is shocking that the Tory government of David Cameron in the UK has funded more community organizers⁸ than the government of Barack Obama.

If the content of these urban policies reflects the theoretical understandings and agendas of the neoliberalized center-left in the US, so too do their size and scope. That is, the solutions are small and incremental. None of these programs are anything more than glorified pilot programs in a handful of cities, and with very little funding behind them. This too is a direct result of the neoliberal turn in the Democratic Party in the past quarter-century. In short, if the market is always going to be the central organizing principle of society, then public policies are always going to be small and the policy agenda becomes one of tinkering around the edges. The small size of these policies is also a product of the politics of neoliberalism. That is, the solutions are small because there are no mobilized constituencies behind them. People do not rally or march or organize to support transit-oriented development, regional planning, poverty deconcentration, or any of the other fashionable ideas in liberal urban-policy circles.

Despite these important continuities, it would be glib and unfair to say that nothing changed during the Obama administration. There have been meaningful and substantial changes. Many of these have had to come through the actions of Executive Department agencies, given the highly obstructionist Republican majority in Congress. Winning significant changes through legislation has been difficult to impossible for the administration.

Some examples of meaningful policy intervention have included Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012 and Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) in 2014, even if they were much less than immigrant advocates wanted or were fighting for. While the courts are still weighing in on these, if allowed to stand, they are very significant actions on immigration policy. In a very different context, HUD's actions around fair housing, and "affirmatively furthering fair housing" have been important steps in enforcing fair housing laws that have too often been unenforced in prior administrations.

There have also been legislative victories. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009 was a significant legislative achievement with substantial resources going to urban projects, often in the form of what Hilary Silver (2010) has called "stealth urban policies." The administration also managed to get continued and increased funding for homelessness prevention, and this seems to have paid off. Finally, the very large increase in the number of people with health

⁷ Website: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>.

⁸ See: http://shelterforce.org/article/government-funded_organizing.

insurance resulting from the Affordable Care Act (ACA) is a major accomplishment with important urban implications. The ACA also mandates that hospitals do much more to address the health needs of their surrounding communities than they previously did.

On balance, this is not a bad record, but it is also not a particularly good one. It is certainly not at all a transformational or inspiring one. And the smallness of the urban interventions in our time consistently reminds me of an exhortation from Daniel Burnham, the master planner in Chicago more than 100 years ago: “Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men’s blood...” There is no magic to stir anyone’s blood in the neoliberal urban policies of Clinton–Obama–Clinton. Not even enough, apparently, to get them to vote.

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