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## Multi-level power and progressive regionalism

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## **Multi-Level Power and Progressive Regionalism**

**Margaret Weir and Jane Rongerude**

**May 2007**

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**



## **Multi-Level Power and Progressive Regionalism**

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University of California, Berkeley

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Since the rediscovery of regionalism in the early 1990s, advocates have touted its virtues as a solution to a diverse menu of urban, suburban, and national ills, ranging from economic competitiveness to global warming to growing economic inequality. One reason for regionalism's popularity is that it means so many different things to different people. For some of its supporters, regionalism entails new forms of collaboration among business elites; for others, it means state regulations, such as tax-base sharing that links the fate of the region's localities together; for still others, regionalism evokes the image of authoritative institutions that can devise and implement plans for rational patterns of metropolitan growth and development.

Enthusiasm for regionalism, however, is not universal. Skeptics have questioned whether regional activity is a costly diversion from attention to local neighborhood concerns, where, it is argued, real benefits for low-income neighborhoods and the people who live in them are to be had. Imbroscio for example, argues that, despite all the talk about regionalism, there is no evidence that the poor ever benefit from entering larger metropolitan arenas, where issues of greatest concern to low-income people typically receive short shrift (Imbroscio 2006).

This paper examines the tension between regionalism and progressive goals, focusing on the effort to ensure that the benefits of growth are widely shared and that the concerns of low-income neighborhoods and the residents are a regional priority. Drawing

on our research about transportation politics in the Los Angeles and Chicago regions over the past fifteen years, we argue that although decisions about how regions grow are critical to low-income communities, it does not follow that engagement at the regional level will yield benefits to low-income communities. Like the critics of regionalism, we contend that engaging in regional collaboration is unlikely to benefit low-income people. Moreover, we argue, the widely used image of the "regional table" is misleading: There are in fact, very few authoritative regional forums, and the more informal and collaborative the forum, the less likely it is that participation will yield tangible benefits for low-income people.

Instead, we argue that progressive regionalism must be viewed as a process of building multilevel power, not participation in regional venues per se. This perspective recognizes that, without the backing of a legal threat or strong regulatory policy levers, low-income communities lack the power to influence regional decisions, even when they participate in regional venues. It also underscores the fact that many regional decisions of critical importance to low-income communities are made in multiple political venues—federal, state, and local, rather than in a single regional venue. Because the region is not a coherent political entity, regional outcomes are likely to represent the intersection of decisions taken at multiple levels of government. As a result, participation in the regional venues that do exist may actually be little more than a diversion, leading low-income advocates to expend effort in an arena that has little real influence over decision making.

The paper first examines the tension between regionalism and progressive goals, highlighting the specific ways that regionalism has been defined by progressive critics. We then introduce the case of transportation, showing how efforts to modernize

transportation infrastructure over the past two decades have threatened low-income communities. The last section of the paper examines three modes of engaging with regional transportation decisions, drawing on the experience of Chicago and Los Angeles regions: collaborative networks, project-based organizing, and social movement and coalition-building efforts. We show the benefits and difficulties entailed in each mode of engagement, highlighting the way power in cross-scale political venues shapes outcomes.

### **The Tension between Regionalism and Progressive Goals**

Many of the contemporary concerns about regionalism were first aired during the second wave of interest in regionalism in the 1960s. Progressive critics charged that proposals to consolidate local governments would harm low-income communities of color. Political consolidation, it was feared—with reason—aimed to dilute black political power, which, for the first time, was emerging as a strong force in many cities.

Writing in the *New Republic* in 1967, academic activists Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward charged that metropolitan government would support the advancement of new black elites but would simply reinforce the fundamental disempowerment of the mass of black citizens. Their fear was that national Democratic politicians, anxious to avoid black political challenges, were promoting metropolitanism as an administrative process to supplant politics. Julian Bond, from his vantage point as a black member of the Georgia Legislature in the late 1960s, assessed metropolitanism negatively: "Always, metropolitanism contributes to the diminution of black political power. I see this from what I know of Nashville, Jacksonville, and Miami (where forms of metro governments have developed)" (Rendon 1969). At the time, Bond was a leader

in the (successful) effort to fend off the consolidation of Atlanta and its surrounding counties that was aimed at diluting the minority vote.

The large political jurisdictions created by metropolitan political consolidation yield a larger tax base and in so doing present possibilities for more generous redistributive policies, but research shows no connection between large political jurisdictions and enhanced redistribution. Studies of city-county consolidations have not found any increase in redistributive policies (Imbroscio 2006; Altshuler and Luberoff 1999). As a recent analysis of the city-county consolidation of Louisville argued, “the only thing consolidated was elite power ... redistributive policies were not part of the campaign for consolidation, nor seriously considered during the process of consolidation, nor regarded as a realistic policy choice after consolidation (Savitch and Vogel 2004, 772). David Rusk, who argues in favor of large political jurisdictions—“elastic cities” that annex the growth on their periphery—provides no evidence that poor minority neighborhoods are better off in such cities (Rusk 1993). In fact, good public services in poor neighborhoods require substantial mobilization of the poor—something that is often difficult in these large political systems, particularly in sunbelt cities with a legacy of progressive reform, which stifled political participation. This criticism holds true of other large “elastic” political jurisdictions that Rusk praises, such as Indianapolis (powell 2000).

The dangers of regionalism for poor urban neighborhoods are illustrated by recent developments in Pittsburgh. As the city moved toward bankruptcy in 2004, efforts at

regional revitalization, overseen by a state-initiated Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority, focused on the development of regional assets, not the city and its neighborhoods. In the words of one critic, “resident tax money goes to large regional projects like baseball and football stadiums, convention centers ... [while] neighborhood assets like parks and recreation and senior centers are squeezed to the point where now they are threatened with total elimination” (McCollester 2005).

Most of the evidence we have about the impact of regionalism on the voice of low-income communities and redistribution analyzes the impact of governmental consolidation or the experience large urban areas, which have grown through annexation. The recent enthusiasm for regionalism, by contrast, has focused on “governance,” that is, the formal and informal relationships and institutions—both public and private—that coordinate action across a metropolitan region. Can regional governance strategies, which may be more targeted and flexible and capable of building consensus, overcome the problems associated with older strategies of regional consolidation?

### **Regional Transportation and Low-Income Communities**

Transportation provides an excellent policy focus for assessing the possibilities inherent in regional governance. Transportation infrastructure creates core patterns of access throughout the region that have a far-reaching impact on community life and individual opportunity (Bullard 2004). Recognizing this, transportation activists in the early 1990s, sought to open up this largely closed decision-making arena to incorporate new voices at the regional level.



Decisions about transportation have long had a critical impact on low-income communities. The role of highway construction in the devastation of low-income communities of color during the 1950s and early 1960s has been extensively documented. But we know less about how these communities are faring in the face of more recent campaigns to "modernize the metropolis." Beginning in the 1980s, a new wave of innovation has sought to rebuild metropolitan transportation infrastructures that promote regional competitiveness, improve the quality of life throughout the region, and spur urban revitalization. In the field of transportation, decisions about preserving older infrastructure and forms of transportation service while attempting to create new ones, such as new rail and light rail projects, raise new questions about whether efforts to update and revitalize regional infrastructure can incorporate the needs of low-income communities as part of their regional vision.

The passage of the ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) in 1991, created some promise that the concerns of low-income communities would stand a better chance in decisions about regional infrastructure. The legislation introduced new provisions designed to open transportation decisions beyond the tight circle of developers and roadbuilders that had long dominated policy, which was centered at the state level. New flexibility in spending, enhanced spending responsibilities for nearly defunct Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), and provisions for community participation in the MPO regional planning process all promised to change the rules of the game in ways that could benefit low-income communities.

To assess whether these changes did, in fact, allow low-income communities to influence decisions about regional transportation we examined Chicago and Los Angeles,

two growing regions experiencing active efforts to modernize transportation infrastructure during the past two decades. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 organizations engaged in transportation issues in the Los Angeles region and 35 in the Chicago region, supplemented by open-ended interviews with selected political actors in each region. We also consulted unpublished reports and published news accounts of transportation reform in each region.

### **The Challenge of Inclusive Regionalism**

Our research revealed three distinct modes of engagement around regional transportation issues. The first was regional collaboration, in which diverse groups convened in formal and informal contexts in order to plan and map out future directions for the region. The second were efforts to influence the terms on which regional projects, such as highways, light rail, and other major infrastructure projects would be built. The final mode of engagement was political coalition building aimed at influencing state legislation or popular referenda related to transportation. Each mode of engagement, as we will see, had distinct advantages and drawbacks for those advocating the interests of low-income communities.

#### *Regional Collaboration*

The first of these modes is regional collaboration, in which low-income advocates are included as stakeholders in decision-making processes with a range of other regional players. Effective collaboration is structured in a way that allows diverse participants to engage in dialogue, build trust, and learn, ideally transforming both their understanding of the problem and the possible solutions (Innes 1996; Innes and Booher 1999). The

impetus for convening stakeholders might be formal, such as the federally mandated MPO participation requirements, or informal, where a group acting as a regional intermediary pulls together its own network of organizations in an attempt to influence the regional agenda and generate change.

Broad public participation in MPO deliberations is an essential element of the ISTEA reform effort. The requirement provided organizations that had not previously had access to these arenas the opportunity to participate. The hope was that a new range of voices would expand the transportation agenda, forcing policymakers to consider broader social and economic impacts as they made transportation policy.

During the first decade after national policy reform, neither the Los Angeles nor the Chicago regions' MPOs took serious steps to ensure public participation in transportation decision making. Instead, they structured participation so that it had the least impact on their bureaucratic routines. It took a combination of local and national political pressure and clear signals in the new legislation before the MPOs became willing to solicit public input in the planning process. In Los Angeles, the MPO (SCAG) launched a broad public visioning process that created a set of principles designed to guide future growth in the region (Interview 3/13/03). In Chicago, the Center for Neighborhood Technology felt that after a decade of dogging the MPO, they had earned the agency's respect and were viewed as a legitimate voice (Interview, 6/28/05).

The Southern California Transportation and Land Use Coalition (SCTLUC)<sup>1</sup> in Los Angeles hoped to use the participation requirements as a tool for educating the public

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<sup>1</sup> Since our interviews, the Southern California Transportation and Land Use Coalition has changed its name to the Transportation and Land Use Collaborative of Southern California, changed offices, and changed leadership. While the similarities between the two names reflect a likely continuity of purpose with the organization, we use the older name in this paper to accurately identify the moment in the organization's history when we interviewed organizational representatives.

around a broad smart growth agenda. Started in 2001, the organization's objective is "to promote greater public awareness and involvement in regards to growth trade offs, to have public understanding and engagement." SCTLUC has a multi-faceted view of transportation that looks beyond the traditional transit versus highways framework to link transportation, land use, housing, and public health. Founders hoped to fill a regional vacuum in transportation-advocacy leadership using a collaborative approach based on education and civic engagement.

Transportation participation requirements provided an opportunity for SCTLUC to expand their outreach efforts. "We decided to go after contracts [with public agencies]. We are matching convening the public with contracts." (Interview 3/13/03) One example of the group's work is the Envision La Brea project which was funded through a Caltrans Community Based Transportation Planning Grant. Completed in 2006, Envision La Brea worked with residents and business-owners in the low-income community surrounding a future light rail station in La Brea to create a vision that incorporated smart growth principles while considering the unique needs of the community. The steering committee for the project included local elected officials, neighborhood alliances, the school district, the local chamber of commerce, METRO, the Los Angeles Planning Department, and local churches, among others. Because these convenings were situated within a formal public process, they were open to any interested party. Low-income groups need not be regional to contribute to the regional agenda or to have a voice in the transportation plans for their neighborhood.

While intermediaries such as SCTLUC are able to facilitate more creative ways of thinking about transportation, they are limited by the need to secure funding. Foundation

funding is unsure, and working on a fee-for-service basis limits participation to those areas where regional agencies have identified a need for a local plan. Communities faced with service cutbacks or those left out of regional transportation systems are left with few opportunities for collaboration.

Informal regional collaborations provide an opportunity to bring together a broad range of players around complex issues that fall outside the jurisdiction of more formal government entities. One prominent example is the Collaborative Regional Initiative (CRI) in California. CRI is a broad category covering more than twenty different regional partnerships, each of which brings together participants from the private, public, and non-profit sectors to promote economic vitality and improve the quality of life. One study of CRIs found that, while these organizations lacked any sort of formal power or authority, they nonetheless generated change through on-the-ground, concrete projects such as land or conservation easements purchased to protect the environment in the Sierra or the SENTRI lane to improve times crossing the border between Tijuana and San Diego. They also enhanced civic capacity by educating leaders and generating dialogue; and sparked the creation of several spin-off organizations. The CRIs' strength came in large part from the way each was tailored to the dynamics and culture of its region. The most effective CRIs were those developed through careful groundwork by civic leaders who understood the region's unique culture and urgent issues.

While the collaboration connected to formal deliberative processes has created opportunities for low-income groups to participate in transportation planning, informal regional collaborations are less likely to include those same voices. Out of the four CRIs studied in depth, only one, the Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities, had

explicit representation in its leadership from a group representing low-income people. The Bay Area Alliance created the Social Equity Caucus, which has become an important regional voice for low-income advocates and issues related to social justice. Without this independent organization of low income groups, CRIs were more likely to think of regional equity in terms of economic development, workforce training, or education reform. Some, such as the San Diego Dialogue, explicitly excluded grassroots leaders from membership because they were not perceived as having a “regional” focus.

Although regional collaboration has attracted the lion’s share of attention for enthusiasts of “new regionalism,” it is not a promising venue for achieving outcomes that will benefit low income communities. Informal regional collaborations, often dominated by business elites, are under no obligation to include representatives of low income communities and are likely to define the interests of those communities according to their own priorities, when they consider them at all.

Formal regional collaborations, as provided for in the ISTEA legislation, provide a more reliable venue for low income advocates. However, because MPOs themselves rarely exercise much independent authority over regional transportation spending, participation in this venue may be a costly diversion for low income advocates. The assessment of low income transportation activists in Boston is instructive. After three years of pushing for greater participation in the MPO, they abandoned the effort reflecting that,

“In the end, we figured out that the Boston MPO was also a puppet of the Governor, controlled largely by the state transportation agencies. It really did not make any decisions on its own. What ended up in the MPO’s plans and prioritized for funding from year to year was still controlled by the Governor. As it turned out, the MPO process was largely

a way to divert community energy away from the real sources of power (Loh 2006).

### *Project-based organizing*

Our two cases from Los Angeles and Chicago show that, under the right circumstances, regional project-based organizing has yielded tangible benefits for low income communities and their residents. The cases also reveal two conditions that are critical to determining what low income communities can achieve through project-based organizing. The first is access to a legal lever; without such a threat low-income groups have little power over the terms of major development projects. The second factor affecting the types of gains low income communities can receive are the horizontal networks in which groups advocating for low income people are embedded. Horizontal networks connect groups to diverse forms of expertise and influence, potentially providing access to new resources and creative approaches to turning the challenges that major projects pose into opportunities for low income neighborhoods.

In Chicago and Los Angeles, two major transportation infrastructure projects in the 1990s directly pitted the interests of low-income communities against elite-sponsored modernization plans. In each case, challengers tapped into broader networks that helped them transform threats into opportunities to benefit from modernization plans. In Chicago, a coalition turned a threat to a major transit line into an opportunity to improve transportation and to promote community economic development. In Los Angeles, challenges to a major infrastructure project resulted in significant new job opportunities for residents of the adjoining low-income communities.

The Chicago Transit Authority's plans for modernizing transit in 1992 included dismantling the deteriorating hundred-year old Green Line, which runs from the Loop (Chicago's central business district) through the city's West Side, a low-income African American neighborhood, and into the western suburbs, a racially-mixed middle income community. The Green Line's ridership had declined significantly during the 1970s and 80s as the redlined communities it served experienced substantial disinvestment and depopulation (National Neighborhood Coalition 2000; Olsen n.d.).

The campaign to save the Green Line benefited both from constraints imposed from above as well as mobilization from below. The constraints included federal rules that could have required the CTA to pay a penalty for abandoning a capital project -- such as stations on the Green Line -- in operation for less than 40 years (Gillis 1993).

Although the CTA cited these constraints as central to its decision to restore the line, there is no doubt that it was also greatly influenced by pressure from below. Advocates for saving the line created a broad political coalition (the Lake Street El Coalition) that joined city and suburban interests and eventually won the support of a number of powerful politicians. Chicago's politically oriented transportation network proved vital in this effort. One key intermediary organization -- the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (NCBG), a coalition of two hundred community organizations, had been in existence for over a decade, and had considerable organizing experience in the city of Chicago. The Lake Street El Coalition it assembled notably included business interests and mayors from six adjoining suburban communities that relied on the Green Line.

The existence of expert intermediary organizations and experienced community development corporations was essential to the innovative plan to link transit preservation



and neighborhood economic revitalization. Together with the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), a non-profit technical assistance organization and Bethel New Life, a faith-based community development corporation on the West Side, the NCBG and the Lake Street El Coalition proposed that renovation of the Green Line be combined with transit-oriented development around its stations. The “Community Green Line Initiative,” as their plan was called, proposed to redensify the West Side, revitalizing the community and addressing declining ridership. After the CTA agreed to rehabilitate the Green Line, the transit-oriented development component was fleshed out further in a report by the Urban Land Institute (Urban Land Institute 1995). The project eventually was narrowed to a single L stop, with a plan for housing, commercial development, a child day care center and a health center other services to surround the station. Bethel New Life and the Center for Neighborhood Technology took the lead in developing and implementing the plan.

The coalition built power at multiple levels. Counted among the official coalition members were two members of Chicago’s congressional delegation and one state senator. Power at the state and, particularly the federal level, was essential to getting the CTA to make the \$300 million commitment to preserve the Green Line. The transit-oriented development part of the project was well-positioned to access funds and technical assistance from a variety of sources because it encompassed multiple objectives, including economic development, housing, public transit and clean air. The “smart growth” framing of the neighborhood revitalization project allowed Bethel New Life to attract partners not usually associated with urban redevelopment, such as Argonne National Laboratory. In the words of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, the

broad cooperative effort represented “a powerful step in working toward the metropolitan-wide goals of investment and revival of mature communities” (Ibata and Holt 1993).

Like the Green Line Campaign, Los Angeles’s Alameda Corridor Jobs Coalition shows how local groups can draw on a binding constraint and a broader network to make modernizing initiatives benefit low-income communities. In this case, vertical ties to a national organization led to changes in federal law that created possibilities for much wider diffusion of the model of change initiated in Los Angeles.

The coalition of churches, community development, and social service organizations that banded together into the Alameda Corridor Jobs Coalition (ACJC) sought to secure training and good jobs for the residents of their low-income communities. The coalition organized in 1997 as a response to a major infrastructure project -- the Alameda Corridor Project -- designed to keep the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles globally competitive in the 21st-century. The project was a massive engineering project designed to speed rail freight from the ports through the residential neighborhoods of Southeast Los Angeles. Once the heart of the region's heavy manufacturing, these low income communities would experience significant disruption but receive no benefits from the Alameda Corridor Project.

As in the case of Chicago's Green Line, the combination of a legal action and political organizing allowed these communities to turn this threat into an opportunity. As the project began to get underway in the late 1990s, several of the affected local governments initiated joint and individual lawsuits against multiple aspects of the project, including its organizational structure and environmental impact (Callahan 2002).

Concerned to head off delays that lawsuits could cause, the Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority, the organization set up to oversee the project, settled separately with each of the cities (Callahan 2002). The agreements gave the cities money in exchange for legally binding commitments not to challenge the project. By themselves, these agreements did little to provide positive benefits to community residents; the local politicians had demanded money for projects of dubious benefits to their residents.

But at the same time that the cities were making their deals with the corridor authority, a group of local and nationally-connected community organizations met to consider how the project might translate into broader benefits for the residents of these low income communities (Matsuoka 2005). They succeeded in securing an agreement with the authority requiring that local residents receive 30 per cent of the work hours on the central portion of the corridor. In addition, a pre-apprenticeship program and apprenticeship program were funded (Sanchez, Rich, and Ma 2003). This was a significant victory on two counts. The coalition had found a way around federal prohibitions on requirements for local hiring on transportation projects. Moreover, it had secured an agreement with the local Carpenters Union for sponsoring apprenticeships. Given the historic resistance of building trades unions to actively recruiting minority members, the agreement indicated new possibilities for cooperation.

In contrast to the Green Line campaign, the jobs coalition did not draw on the existing transportation network in Los Angeles for formulating its strategy or for political support in achieving its goals. Instead, it relied on a separate vertical network that linked it to the Center for Community Change, a national advocacy and technical assistance organization. In 1997, the center had organized the Transportation Equity Network

(TEN), with the aim of building a coalition of community-based organizations to advocate for inclusion of specific provisions to assist low income communities in the upcoming federal transportation legislation (Kruglik and Stolz 1999; Kruglik 1999). The organization's local office played a key role in bringing the coalition together and helping develop its priorities. As one participant put it, "The Corridor Project is talking about local hiring. It was not an issue until TEN was working on it. Success on that project has changed the thought process of people – how can this project benefit the community through employment. It is an example project" (Interview 6/26/03). At the local level, the coalition tapped into a network of community-based organizations and progressive activists that had experience with community benefits agreements in the past (Matsuoka 2005). Together this set of vertical and horizontal linkages supported a strategic process that turned the Alameda Corridor Project into a new set of opportunities for the affected communities.

The vertical ties to TEN brought both expertise and political access to the local coalition. This combination of resources enabled the local groups to work around initial barriers posed by federal restrictions on attaching local hiring requirements to federal transportation dollars. The type of political and legal expertise that opened the door for the jobs agreement was a product of ideas being developed at the national level. The local transportation network, oriented as it was around the MPO planning process, had little to offer to push forward this type of thinking.

Over time, however, the ACJC built new horizontal ties that proved politically useful. The local coalition expanded its regional network beyond its base of community-based organizations to include connections with business and trade organizations. It

found that these groups were not only more knowledgeable about the politics of development than community-based organizations, they also provided valuable access to vertical political power. For example, once the coalition started working with the LA Chamber of Commerce, it opened the doors of congressional representatives who could intervene in support of funding for the project. Broader horizontal ties also allowed the coalition to negotiate new job opportunities for low-income community residents outside the field of transportation (Interview 6/26/03).

The vertical connections that had helped create the ACJC in the first place made it easier to then bring these experiences back to Washington to influence national policy. In lobbying to change federal transportation law to allow for local hiring preferences, the Washington-based Center for Community Change could point to the success of the Alameda Corridor Jobs Coalition. This goal was realized when the much delayed transportation bill (SAFTEA-LU) became law in 2005. Section 1920 of the legislation explicitly pointed to the experience of the Alameda Corridor Jobs Coalition in declaring that federal transportation projects should "facilitate and encourage the collaboration" between groups "that have an interest in improving the job skills of low income individuals, to help leverage scarce training and community resources and to help ensure local participation in the building of transportation projects (2005)."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Section 1920 of the act read: "It is the sense of Congress that Federal transportation projects should facilitate and encourage the collaboration between interested persons, including Federal, State, and local governments, community colleges, apprentice programs, local high schools, and other community-based organizations that have an interest in improving the job skills and low-income individuals, to help leverage scarce training and community resources and to help ensure local participation in the building of transportation projects." See the full text of Section 1920 at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109\\_cong\\_bills&docid=f:h3enr.txt.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109_cong_bills&docid=f:h3enr.txt.pdf), accessed 6/10/06.

As Swanstrom and Banks show, this change in federal law immediately sparked several new efforts to create local hiring agreements on transportation projects. The rapid movement between the national policy openings and local strategizing was possible because a national organizing network with local affiliates, the Gamaliel Foundation, had made transportation issues an important component of its work (Swanstrom and Banks 2006). The local-national ties helped to build recursive power in which local innovations provided evidence for altering federal laws and changes in federal laws in turn spurred further experimentation with the model of linking development and jobs. Yet, the movement across the levels does not happen spontaneously: rather, specific organizational ties created connections across the levels of government and brought together the different capacities that created the model and allowed it to disseminate.

What is striking about each of these challenges to regional modernization projects is that none of them relied on the formal regional planning apparatus – the MPO -- set up by the ISTEA legislation. Instead, they became possible because of diverse federal laws and regulations that local activists used as levers to extract benefits for low income communities. When these levers were supplemented by diverse horizontal and vertical ties, low income advocates were able to make gains that went well beyond simply defending neighborhoods against harm. However, in each case, these challenges remained fundamentally reactive. Moreover, once the immediate threat had receded, these project-based alliances did not have enough coherence to make them a lasting force able to influence other regional transportation decisions.

The limits of project-based organizing raise questions about the experience of more broad-based efforts to influence regional transportation decisions in ways that benefit low-income neighborhoods and residents. Two such efforts, the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles and the Campaign to Build Illinois Transit, highlight the difficulties involved in building such power but they also provide clues as to the kinds of alliances needed to sustain a voice for low-income residents in regional decisions.

The Los Angeles-based Bus Riders Union has captured widespread attention as a movement that successfully challenged powerful interests to alter regional transportation priorities in favor of low-income people (Brown 1998; Grengs 2002; Mann 2004). Its experience demonstrates the mobilization of legal expertise and protest needed to activate multi-level power. It also highlights the dangers of an approach that relies so heavily on legal levers.

The origins of the Bus Riders Union were explicitly defensive, much like the Green Line Coalition and the ACJC. During the 1980s, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the agency charged with transportation spending in Los Angeles County, had embraced a modernization plan that directly pitted an expensive new rail system, designed to link the downtown with the suburbs, against an already overburdened bus system (Richmond 2005).

The MTA's decision in 1994 to divert funding from the bus system to subsidize the escalating costs of the rail projects was the spark behind the creation of the Bus Riders Union. Although the BRU is frequently called a social movement and has over time marshaled grassroots support, central to its activities and success is the lawsuit it filed against the MTA in 1994. Charging the MTA with transit racism, the suit argued

that transportation policy violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits racial discrimination by recipients of federal funds (Mann 1997). For evidence, the lawsuit cited the disproportionate public spending on the highly subsidized commuter rail used by middle class whites, and the proposed increases in fares on the bus system used disproportionately by people of color (Brown 1998; Grengs 2002). In 1996, the challengers achieved a major victory when the MTA signed a consent decree agreeing to reduce the price of monthly bus passes and to put substantially more buses into operation to reduce overcrowding.

The Bus Riders Union's effective use of the courts -- and its subsequent well-publicized efforts to ensure that the MTA live up to the agreement -- presents an inspiring David and Goliath story. But the broader implications of the BRU's victory for building enduring power are less clear. In 2001, the main tool that the BRU used to bring its opponents to the table was greatly weakened by the Supreme Court ruling in *Sandoval v. Hagan* (1999). The decision sharply narrows the types of challenges that can be brought under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act by requiring plaintiffs to demonstrate discriminatory intent, not just discriminatory impact. Even before the *Sandoval* decision, advocates in other cities seeking to emulate the Bus Riders Union found that the patterns of racial discrimination were difficult to prove. Especially in long-established transit systems, such as that in Chicago, the sharp divisions in spending patterns characteristic of Los Angeles were less likely to appear making a successful challenge difficult (Interview 4/23/01).



The limits of the legal strategy team into sharp focus in 2007, when the consent decree had expired. Operating under the terms of the consent decree, the MTA had added to the bus fleet and did hold down fares. But it did not halt its ambitious rail program -- initiating three new lines during the period that the consent decree was in place. Faced with a massive deficit, the agency voted in favor of large fare increases less than a year after the consent decree had expired (Lin II and Rabin 2007). Although the Bus Riders Union threatened to sue again, the prospects of success are murky. Not only is the bar higher for demonstrating racial discrimination as a result of the Sandoval decision, the racial division between bus riders and users of rail is likely to be less stark as a result of the new rail lines, including one connecting working class Latino East Los Angeles to downtown.

The successes and uncertain future of the strategy pioneered by the Bus Riders Union highlight two lessons regarding participation and power. The first is the multi-level game that characterizes the interaction between challengers and their opponents. The rules of the game that secure a seat at the local table for less powerful interests are never set once and for all and are themselves the focus of political contestation. Thus, the more conservative federal judiciary made it more difficult to bring successful suits under Title VI claims and, in so doing, altered the menu for local action. Groups that hope to exercise power locally must find ways to exercise their power at higher levels of government to ensure that the levers that allow them to gain influence locally remain in place or that new levers are created.

Second, although relatively small groups can wield power when backed by enforceable legal claims, coalition building becomes much more important in the absence

of such claims. Although the Sandoval decision did not free the MTA from carrying out its obligations under the consent decree, it substantially altered the future strategic terrain for the Bus Riders Union and groups hoping to use the civil rights strategy to gain a place at the table. As one of our respondents noted, “Sandoval changed everything” (Interview 3/14/03). Backed by effective legal levers, the BRU did not need to engage in coalition building beyond the initial cooperation with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and a handful of other groups that assisted in the initial lawsuit. In fact, the BRU’s uncompromising stance against all funding for rail projects has been highly polarizing and has limited its cooperation with other groups. Many of our respondents cited the conflict between bus and rail as one of the areas of greatest conflict among transportation advocates in Los Angeles.

Even so, the Bus Riders Union has won support as a vigorous defender of the needs of low-income residents of Los Angeles. As such, it fits into a broader context of social movement organizing on behalf of low income and Latino residents in Los Angeles. Chief among the organizations sustaining the movement is the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, which played a critical role in mobilizing progressive forces within the city, leading ultimately to the election of Antonio Villaraigosa as mayor in 2006.

To influence regional policies, such as transportation, even winning control of city government is not enough, however. The Los Angeles mayor has only one vote on the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Although Mayor Villaraigosa vigorously sought to limit fare increases in 2007, he could not rally enough of the board behind him. The fiscal politics of regional transportation require supporters

of progressive regionalism to win more power at higher levels of government, including state and federal arenas. Faced with a state budget that proposed to divert substantial funds from public transportation to cover a budget shortfall, the Los Angeles mayor could not shake loose state resources to forestall the fare increases that the BRU had fought against for over a decade.

### *Campaign to Build Illinois Transit*

The Campaign to Build Illinois Transit launched a different type of effort to improve regional transportation with the interests of low-income residents in mind. The campaign was a state-wide political project initiated by organized labor. It got underway after Mayor Richard M. Daley declared in 1997 that Chicago would have to "rethink and shrink" transit due to a vicious cycle of reduced funding and reduced ridership (Spielman and Jimenez 1997). Alarmed at the potential loss of jobs for its members, two of Chicago's Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) locals backed a statewide battle to increase state spending on public transit.

The campaign's leaders made a strategic decision to bypass the regional level and the planning apparatus created by ISTEA. Because they identified the need for additional resources as key, they targeted the state as the most effective arena for decision making with regard to the size and distribution of the transportation pie. Chicago's MPO was notoriously weak and had never escaped the control of the state department of transportation. And, because Chicago-specific initiatives require some form of coalition-building within the legislature, the campaign launched its own grassroots organizing strategy to bring the coalition to the legislature.

The unions made a second strategic decision: rather than run the effort as a labor-specific campaign, they contracted with a state-based advocacy group, Citizen Action, to organize the broad-based coalition across the state. Within Chicago, a coalition of community-based organizations mobilized to back the campaign. Across the state, allies in community based-organizations, institutions such as community colleges, and other previously inactive backers of enhanced public transit attended hearings and voiced their support for increased spending.

After several years of effort, the campaign petered out in the face of resistance to any tax increases at the state level. Although the campaign managed to persuade numerous community groups to lend their name to the effort, the groups lacked the strength to mobilize much grassroots support. For many of these groups, whose main focus was on local neighborhood issues, transportation was a secondary concern, to which they had only a limited commitment. Ironically, the same was true for organized labor. Although the ATU had initiated the effort, few union members were actively involved in the campaign.

The fate of the coalition underscored the difficulty of organizing to change priorities at the state level. Despite having conducted a broad set of hearings across the state, there was no organizational infrastructure for keeping a statewide coalition of transit supporters alive after several failed attempts to pass the legislation. Although the campaign had succeed in creating new links among diverse groups across the state, the network disappeared once it became apparent that the legislative campaign stood little chance of success in the near term (Interview 5/3/06).

The experience of both the Bus Riders Union and the Campaign to Build Illinois Transit highlights need for anchor organizations to sustain broader coalition-building efforts. The BRU enjoyed a decade of success because the consent decree took MTA decisions about bus transit out of the political process. Unless the BRU can win another legal challenge, its future success will depend on the larger social movement mobilization in Los Angeles. But, as Mayor Villaraigosa's last minute appeal for more funds from Sacramento indicates, the social movement will also need strength at the state level.

Both cases also suggest that organized labor could serve as a powerful force for building multilevel influence needed for progressive regionalism. In Los Angeles, the LA County Federation of Labor has built formidable strength and achieved notable success in injecting the interests of low-income communities into politics. In Chicago, despite the ATU's initiating role in the Campaign to Build Illinois Transit, organized labor, with its close ties to Mayor Daley, has been a less ardent advocate for low-income communities. National reform efforts to reinvigorate labor as a social movement have sought to infuse new energy into labor community coalitions and have sought to promote ideas about progressive regionalism within organized labor (LeRoy 2003). This long-term reform process is one whose outcome will have a major impact on the prospects for building a far-reaching progressive regionalism.

## **Conclusion**

Regionalism presents a conundrum for those hoping to find new ways to promote the interests of low-income communities. On the one hand, decisions about the region, taken outside of low-income neighborhoods, are critical to the menu of opportunities and

possibilities for people who live in these communities. On the other hand, advocates for these communities find it more difficult to make their voices heard in regional venues.

In this article, we argue for an approach to regionalism that is political and multiscalar. As the cases of formal and informal collaboration in California indicated, ostensibly nonpolitical regional arenas are often little more than a diversion for low income advocates. Because there are few truly authoritative regional venues, the decisions that shape metropolitan areas more likely to take place in multiple political arenas, not in regional venues. Only by recognizing the constraints and opportunities in federal, state, and local settings can low-income advocates target and expand their range of influence over regional decisions.

As the cases of project-based organizing show, constraints imposed from above can open space for a more inclusive regionalism in which modernization of regional infrastructure benefits low income communities. Without such constraints, Chicago's Green Line could well have been demolished and the communities along the Alameda Corridor would have experienced the disruption of major construction without reaping any of the benefits. Optimally, local efforts build "recursive power" in which local innovations are written into national regulations, thus expanding the range of action all over the country, as in the case of the local hiring provision championed by the Transportation Equity Network. Building such recursive power requires cross-organizational vertical ties that allow groups to communicate and press their claims across the levels of government.

Finally, as the experience of the Bus Riders Union and Campaign to Build Illinois Transit demonstrates, the forces that shape the flow of resources within and to regions

are, at their heart, political. While legal levers may favorably alter the local political game, as they did for the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles, the retracting scope of civil rights law in recent decades will make it much more difficult to rely on this strategy in the future. Instead, a longer-term effort aimed at identifying and activating new allies and building broad-based coalitions is needed. To be successful, this effort cannot be the task of organizations that represent low-income communities alone. Actors with greater political reach, including organized labor and urban politicians, need to be brought into the effort to build multilevel political power that can lay the basis for more inclusive regional growth.

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