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# Metropolitan political reorganization as a politics of urban growth: the case of San Fernando Valley secession

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## Abstract

Much of the literature on metropolitan political reorganization (defined here as secession, annexation, and incorporation) understands the phenomenon as a self-contained politics. That is, the literature mostly analyzes the politics surrounding reorganization in terms of the powers and responsibilities of the local state itself. Specifically, the literature finds that the main motivations for reorganization are: (1) a desire to reorganize the local collective consumption; and (2) a desire among outlying communities for more local control. I argue that the literature is not wrong, but that the politics of municipal reorganization must be seen in a broader context than just the formal powers and responsibilities of the local state. Specifically, I argue that reorganization is embedded in a wider politics of urban growth. To bring out the relationship between reorganization and growth politics, the paper analyzes the case of a secession movement in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley. I show that, among other goals, secessionists are trying to restructure the local state so that they can now more effectively pursue their agenda with respect to local growth. The paper ends by suggesting some implications of this finding. Because growth politics in American cities are primarily a struggle over urban space, linking reorganization to growth politics provides a more complete understanding of the relationship between the politics of the local state and the geography of the city. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Urban politics; Growth politics; Metropolitan political reorganization

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## **Introduction**

For the last few years, a well-organized group of activists has been campaigning to detach the San Fernando Valley from the rest of the City of Los Angeles and form two new independent cities. This secession group has already won important victories at the county and state levels, and it has recently completed a petition drive to trigger a government study on the implications of secession. If the study's findings are acceptable to LAFCO (the Local Agency Formation Commission, a branch of state government that administers local government changes), a citywide vote on secession could occur as early as 2000. The case of Valley secession offers a remarkable opportunity to study an ongoing attempt at a massive reorganization of a large American metropolis. This paper argues that the traditional literature on metropolitan political reorganization<sup>1</sup> is insufficient to understand the case of Valley secession. The literature tends to see the politics of reorganization as contained within the powers and actions of the formal governmental structure. The case of Valley secession suggests that reorganization should be understood in a political context that is broader than just this formal political structure. Specifically, the politics of metropolitan political reorganization are embedded in the wider politics of urban growth. In the Valley case, reorganization of formal political institutions is not merely an end in itself. It is also, and fundamentally, a tool used by growth advocates and growth opponents to help them pursue their particular growth agenda.

## **The literature on the politics of urban growth**

My discussion on the politics of urban growth draws on the approach of Logan and Molotch (1987) and the many who have addressed the issue of growth in American cities (Jonas & Wilson, 1999; Leitner, 1990; Mollenkopf, 1992; Weiss, 1987; Bassett & Harloe, 1990; Cooke, 1988; Lloyd & Newlands, 1988; Cox & Mair, 1988; Jonas, 1991). Logan and Molotch argue that the central political question in cities concerns the use and development of urban land. Two competing visions struggle over how to use urban land. One vision is that of the growth machine, which advocates continued intensification of local land use and ever-increasing urban growth. The other vision is that of growth opponents, who oppose the intensification of land use and advocate local 'quality of life'. Appropriating Marx's terms, Logan and Molotch argue that the growth machine sees urban land in terms of its exchange value while growth opponents see it in terms of its use value.

The pro-growth coalition includes those with an economic stake in local growth. Land developers, contracting firms, construction interests, labor unions, real estate brokers, local media, and other locally based businesses join with the local govern-

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper I use the term 'metropolitan political reorganization' to refer to the process of reorganizing the formal political structures of the local state, specifically the processes of secession, annexation, and incorporation.

ment interests to advocate land development. The business interests seek the profits associated with land-use intensification, while local governments seek the increased tax revenue that economic growth can bring. The opposition to growth is generally made up of residents groups and environmental groups (Clark & Goetz, 1994; Fainstein & Fainstein, 1983; Fainstein & Hirst, 1995; Davis, 1991; Marston & Towers, 1993; DeLeon, 1992). Residents groups are often the ones to bear the brunt of the negative impacts caused by land-use intensification, such as traffic, noise, pollution, and crowding. Environmental groups argue that land development destroys urban ecosystems and worsens environmental problems such as air pollution, ground water contamination, and habitat disturbance.

These two growth adversaries, then, struggle over the future of land development in the city. The growth machine pursues urban growth, while its opponents seek to preserve their quality of life and environment by advocating slow- or no-growth (see Fig. 1). In essence, the politics of urban growth are a struggle over the geography of the city. They are a struggle between competing visions of how best to shape urban space. Is the city to be a teeming metropolis, with dense residential geographies, intense interpersonal contact, and frenzied movement, or is it to be more serene, with lower densities, more open space, and a slower pace of life? Manuel Castells has characterized such struggles as a contest over the urban meaning of a city, a struggle over what the space of the city is *for* (Castells, 1983, pp. 305–310). Is urban space to be consumed for profit? Or is urban space a field in which residents carry out the daily routines that sustain them? To use Gottdiener’s term, growth politics constitute a struggle over the production of urban space (Gottdiener, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989). The central questions surrounding growth politics are: How is urban space to be produced? Who will produce it? According to whose agenda? Who will benefit and who will lose from the result?

**The literature on metropolitan political reorganization**

In a 1993 article in *Political Geography*, Cox and Jonas call for a new approach to metropolitan political reorganization, one that understands reorganization “with respect to what are, arguably, the major discourses identifiable in the urban politics literature...collective consumption and local economic development...” (Cox & Jonas, 1993, p. 9). While there is a long tradition of work that analyzes the relation-

Group	Participants	Goals for urban land
Growth machine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local business</li> <li>• Local government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exchange value</li> <li>• Intensification of land use</li> <li>• Urban growth</li> </ul>
Growth opponents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residents’ groups</li> <li>• Environmental groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use value</li> <li>• Intensification of local quality of life</li> <li>• slow- or no-growth</li> </ul>

Fig. 1. Summary of growth politics in American cities.

ship between reorganization and collective consumption, few studies have explored the connections between reorganization and local economic development, or what I call the politics of urban growth (Jonas, 1991). The drawback to ignoring the politics of urban growth is that it leads to an analysis where the wider political context in which the local state operates is ignored. To date, the literature on reorganization has largely focused on two issues: (1) the politics of collective consumption; and (2) the question of local political control (see Fig. 2).

Among those who see reorganization as a question of the politics of collective consumption, public choice theorists are perhaps best known. They argue that a more politically fragmented metropolis promotes efficiency because residents, functioning as municipal consumers, choose from among different bundles of services and tax rates that the various municipalities offer (Tiebout, 1956; Buchanan, 1970; Peterson, 1981; Lowry & Lyons, 1989; Stein, 1987). Those with small children, e.g. are willing to pay higher taxes to support a better school system, older people are willing to pay more for better police protection, and childless 35 year-old professionals, needing neither schools nor police, might seek out a city with low taxes and meager services. Public choice theorists thus generally favor secessions and incorporations because they add to the diversity of collective consumption packages from which municipal consumers can choose.

A more liberal view of reorganization also stresses the importance of the politics of collective consumption. Largely, this view suggests that reorganization is a strategy used by the ‘haves’ to avoid their obligations to the ‘have-nots’ (Downs, 1973; Hill, 1974; Newton, 1975; Burns, 1994; Miller, 1981; Morgan & Mareschal, 1999; Weiher, 1991; Rusk, 1995). Judd argues that because “poverty was concentrated in the cities...political independence allowed suburbanites to avoid the financial burdens of supporting welfare programs, public hospitals, special school programs, high police expenditures, and other services that could not be provided by poor residents” (Judd, 1984, p. 175). Similarly, Danielson (1976, p. 18) argues that “independence from the city shields residents of suburbs from much of the public burden of providing for poor families who live in the city”. Marxist authors have echoed this focus on collective consumption. Hoch argues that the City of Industry in California was created to shield industrial firms from the tax burdens of larger cities. Including only about 500 residents within their boundaries, such industrial cities could avoid the service obligations that burden conventional cities (Hoch, 1984, p. 111). Despite

	Collective consumption		Local Control
	Public Choice	Liberal view	
Representative authors	Tiebout (1956); Peterson (1981)	Judd (1984); Danielson (1976)	Teaford (1997)
Basic argument	urban residents as municipal consumers	“haves” avoiding responsibility for “have nots”	small cities want to control their territory

Fig. 2. Summary of the literature on metropolitan political fragmentation.

their different political convictions, both public choice theorists and their more left-wing counterparts ground their understanding of reorganization in the politics of collective consumption.

A second prevailing focus of the literature on metropolitan political reorganization is the question of local control. Smaller municipal units, as the argument goes, mean that local areas retain greater control over their affairs (Weiher, 1991, p. 13; Miller, 1981). Political fragmentation allows residents of smaller municipalities to avoid being subsumed into larger political units, which would dilute their ability to control their local area. The most significant local control function that small municipalities offer is authority over land-use decisions. This authority allows wealthier cities to exclude land uses that they find distasteful or threatening; industrial districts, public housing, noxious uses, and apartment buildings are good examples. In fact, Teaford argues (with ample evidence) that jealous guarding of land-use authority has been the primary barrier to metropolitan political consolidation in the post-war era (Teaford 1979, 1997; Wallis, 1993). Attempts to consolidate the fragmented metropolis, usually under county authority, have been ongoing, but small cities fear that such consolidation will render them unable to use planning and zoning to control their territories. Fulton (1997, pp. 151–174) has just found such a dynamic at work in the Los Angeles region. The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) has failed in its goal to join the region's many local governments under a unified planning agency, largely because local governments are worried what land-use horrors such an agency would visit upon them should they agree to cede territorial control.

The case of Valley secession does not suggest that we should discard these traditional focuses on collective consumption and local control. Indeed, in arguing for Valley secession, activists have stressed unfair taxation, inadequate city services, and a desire for more local control. One could very well analyze this case in the context of the literature on metropolitan political reorganization. However, the case of Valley secession suggests that we must understand reorganization as embedded in a wider political context. I argue that Valley secession can be fruitfully understood as firmly embedded in the growth politics of the Los Angeles region. Growth politics constitute a wider political context because, while the local state has an important role to play as an adjudicator, land-use struggles are rooted in broader social conflicts in civil society, particularly developers vs. residents and exchange value vs. use value. The various actors in the secession struggle are pursuing or opposing reorganization as more than just an end in itself. They are pursuing or opposing it so that they can pursue their respective agendas for local land and economic development more effectively. While Valley secession is unquestionably tied to the politics of both collective consumption and local control, it is also situated in a wider political context, a context that extends beyond the formal powers of the local state.

### **Valley secession**

In many ways, the San Fernando Valley is a microcosm of the twentieth-century suburban America. Like many other outlying areas in the United States, it agreed

to be annexed (in 1915) to its central city (Los Angeles) in exchange for better local government services; in the Valley's case the draw was Los Angeles's large and newly acquired water supply (McWilliams, 1946; Fogelson, 1967; Scott & Soja, 1996; Kahrl, 1982; Nadeau, 1950). After annexation secured access to water, the area was partially developed in residential tracts that were located close to streetcar lines. After World War II the Valley became the quintessential American automobile suburb in both image and reality as rampant residential development converted farms and citrus groves to subdivisions and shopping malls (Nadeau, 1961). As in the other cities, the land development was rapid and extensive — mass-production techniques in building, heavy federal subsidies for roads and mortgage underwriting, the spread of the automobile, and accelerating white flight all galvanized Valley building (Jackson, 1985; Davis, 1990). Since 1970, the Valley has increasingly resembled an edge city as office parks, aerospace firms, and industrial enterprise have brought new employment to what had been predominantly a bedroom suburb (Scott, 1996). Recently, the Valley has been changing demographically. In the 1950s and 1960s whites made up over 90% of the Valley's population (Meeker, 1964, pp. 28–29); in 1990 they were a little over half (57%) (US Bureau of the Census, 1990). The change has mostly been affected by an influx of Latinos, the bulk of whom have settled in the East Valley near the Interstate 5 corridor. Many whites have fled to more distant areas like Thousand Oaks, Santa Clarita, and Simi Valley. Many whites, however, have chosen to stay in the Valley and take an active role in its future.<sup>2</sup> One result of that activism has been the recent movement among Valley homeowners and businesses to detach the San Fernando Valley from the City of Los Angeles and establish two independent cities (see Fig. 3). The secessionists have so far won several important victories, and there is every possibility that they will place the issue on the ballot within the next few years.

This secession movement is not the first in the Valley's history. Since its incorporation in 1915 Valley residents have made periodic attempts to win independence from the City of Los Angeles. In 1978, for example, a coalition made up mostly of business interests hatched a plan to separate the Valley from the city (Purcell, 1997). It narrowly failed. Mayor Tom Bradley and the City Council responded to the near-miss by shepherding a bill through the state legislature which gave California cities veto power over secession attempts. The law prohibited parts of a city from detaching, even after a popular vote to do so, unless the local city council approved the plan (Purcell, 1997). That veto power has held Los Angeles together for the last 20 years. However, in 1997 secession activists teamed with two state representatives from the Valley to pass a bill in the state legislature that removed the city's veto power. Known as the McClintock–Hertzberg bill, it opened the door for a new push at Valley secession.

The coalition that helped bring about the bill is now guiding the secession attempt.

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<sup>2</sup> Race is clearly an issue in the secession movement. The Valley has significantly higher percentage of white population than the remaining city, and most secession activists (especially the founding members of Valley VOTE) are white. However, because the issue is extremely complex and I cannot treat it in adequate detail here, I have chosen to omit a discussion of race and treat the issue more fully elsewhere.

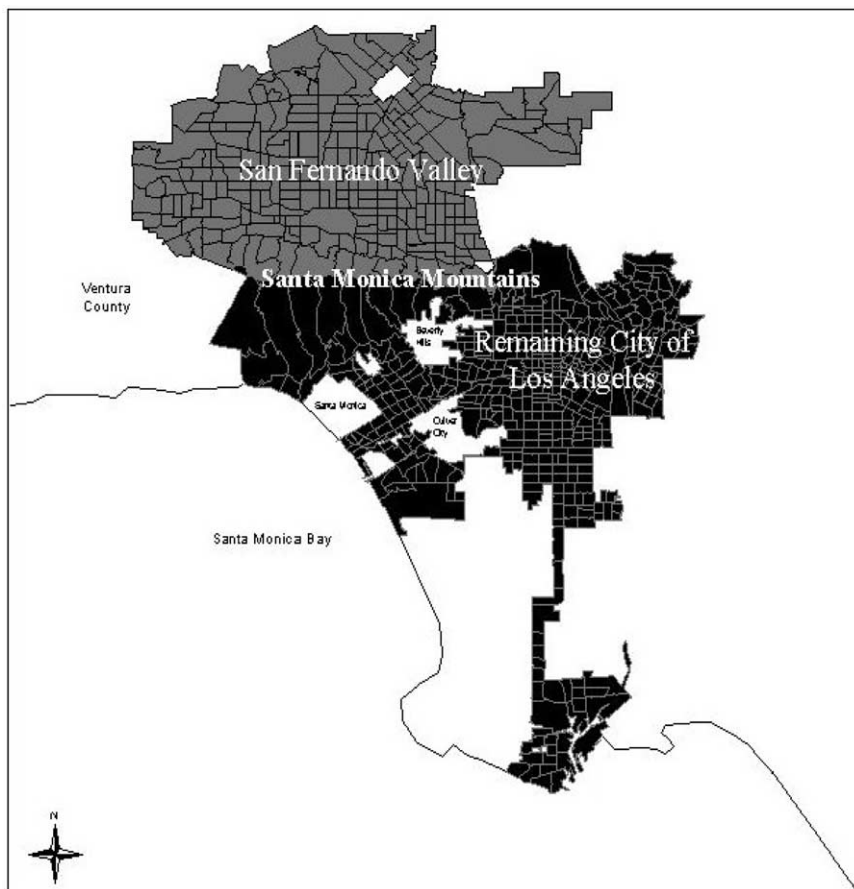


Fig. 3. The city of Los Angeles, showing San Fernando Valley and remaining city.

At its head is an organization called Valley VOTE (Voters Organized Together for Empowerment). Valley VOTE is a coalition of two habitual growth adversaries: Valley business interests and Valley homeowners groups. The business groups are mostly parochial growth machine interests. They include groups such as the United Chambers of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley, the San Fernando Valley Association of Realtors, the Valley Industry and Commerce Association (VICA), and many local Valley chambers of commerce.<sup>3</sup> The homeowners groups are large organizations, some with as many as 2000 member households. Most are voluntary associations with nominal dues that rely on grassroots activism to advance their

<sup>3</sup> Most local areas in the Valley — Sherman Oaks, Tarzana, or Northridge — have their own chamber of commerce. These chambers then unite to form the Valley-wide United Chambers of Commerce.

agenda. The most powerful among them are based in the South Valley, in neighborhoods like Sherman Oaks, Encino, Studio City, and Tarzana.

The Valley VOTE coalition brings together two groups that differ sharply on the question of growth. The business groups pursue an active pro-growth agenda for the Valley. Indeed it is the mission of the United Chambers and of VICA to promote economic growth and land development in the San Fernando Valley. The homeowners' groups, on the contrary, spend most of their time opposing land development in their neighborhood. They fear that unrestrained growth will worsen the traffic, congestion, parking, and noise problems that development has already brought. Though homeowners also have an interest in the exchange value of their property, nevertheless they are steadfastly hostile to growth, even when it will improve the value of their houses. In interviews with members of Valley VOTE both business and homeowners groups expressed surprise at the nature of the coalition, remarking how rarely the two habitual enemies agree on anything. In terms of growth politics, Valley VOTE represents the lion lying down with the lamb to pursue secession. In order to develop why this split is important, I now turn to an examination of the multi-layered Valley VOTE agenda.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Valley VOTE agenda*

Given that Valley VOTE is a coalition of fundamental enemies, one might expect the group's agenda to lack uniformity. Such is indeed the case. The homeowners wing has its own set of reasons for pursuing secession; homeowners envision a new city in which they can more easily control growth and development. The business wing, likewise, has its own set of reasons for pursuing secession; business envisions a new city that is distinctly *laissez-faire* in land use, taxes, and regulation so that growth and development can proceed unfettered. However, although each wing pursues an agenda designed to advance their particular growth politics, the two sides also *agree* on several key reasons for secession. It is around these points of agreement that the Valley VOTE coalition has come together.

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<sup>4</sup> This analysis of the Valley VOTE agenda is based on more than a year of field work among Valley VOTE members and Valley homeowners, business leaders, and government representatives. It consists of participant observation, interviews, archival work, and a survey of homeowner membership. The archival data included Valley VOTE newsletters and ephemera, homeowners association newsletters, press releases of local officials, position papers of local chambers of commerce, documents from the Local Agency Formation Commission (which administers and evaluates secession requests), and state and local documents pertaining to the issue as well as articles from the *Los Angeles Times* and the Valley's *Daily News*. About 35 interviews were conducted with Valley VOTE leaders, homeowner leaders, local business interests, City Council members, and state legislators. The observations were made at about 10 Valley VOTE meetings, 40 homeowners meetings, 10 City Council meetings relevant to the secession question, and numerous other meetings relating to secession. Additionally numerous informal in-person and e-mail conversations with Valley VOTE leaders, members, and others supplemented the above research.

*Where they agree*

Both business and homeowners agree that for many years the City of Los Angeles has been ‘short changing’ the Valley in terms of collective consumption. In what has been popularly called the ‘fair share’ argument, secessionists contend that the Valley pays more in taxes to the city than it receives in services. They complain that the Valley is forced to subsidize the remaining city and serves essentially as a ‘big fat cash cow to be milked over and over’ by the city government (Valley VOTE, 1998c). One homeowner leader portrays the imbalance hyperbolically: “it’s like the farmer who grows all the food, and all the neighbors come and take it, and [the farmer] starves to death”. Secessionists argue that this subsidy would be remedied by secession, as taxes collected in the new Valley city would be spent on services for the Valley.<sup>5</sup> It is important to point out that no one really knows if this Valley subsidy exists. Accurate numbers are notoriously difficult to obtain, and defining the amount of services that directly benefit the Valley (or the remaining city) is a contested issue. The three most well-known studies were all carried out by secession proponents. The Valley’s *Daily News*, which is staunchly pro-secession and even went so far as to make a large contribution to Valley VOTE, found that the Valley pays slightly more in taxes than it gets back in services (Barrett, 1996). Another study also found a mild disparity between what the Valley paid and what it received; the study was conducted by a student at the California State University, Northridge under the direction of Shirley Svorny, an Economics professor and member of the Valley VOTE board (Carroll, 1996). Lastly, a study carried out in 1977 found that the Valley paid *three times* the amount in taxes that it received in services; that study was conducted by CIVICC<sup>6</sup> the group that nearly succeeded in detaching the Valley from both the city and the county (CIVICC, 1977). However, although there are no entirely reliable facts, both secession factions nevertheless argue that the subsidy exists, and they agree on secession as a way to end it.

Both wings also agree that the Los Angeles City government is entirely too large and inefficient. The city of Los Angeles, they argue, covers such a large territory that St. Louis, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Cleveland, San Francisco, Boston, Pittsburgh, and Manhattan would all fit within its boundaries. Further, they complain, that this vast territory and its population are represented by only 15 council members, meaning each council district contains about 250,000 constituents. That ratio is the largest in the United States. New York City has the next-worst ratio; there each council member represents about 145,000 people. A more typical ratio for large US cities would be that of Boston, where each council member represents about 45,000 people. Secessionists argue that Los Angeles’ poor ratio means each council member is unable to meet the needs of his or her constituents properly. They contend that breaking Los Angeles into two smaller cities would allow for better representation ratios and make the city government more responsive.

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<sup>5</sup> This statement is only partially true, since many taxes (such as income and property) flow to levels of government above the local and are then redistributed from there. However, many other taxes (such as sales and business) would be mostly captured by a the new city boundary.

<sup>6</sup> CIVICC stands for ‘Committee Investigating Valley Independent City/County’.

The two Valley VOTE factions also agree that city government is not only too large, but also terribly arrogant and aloof. They talk of their frustration in dealing with council offices and city bureaucracies because, they say, city representatives are so secure in their position that they see little reason to take the needs and concerns of the average citizen seriously. As a Valley VOTE board member put it, “the government, which had been of the people, by the people and for the people, is now of the bureaucrats, by the bureaucrats and for the bureaucrats”. Secessionists claim this problem has two sources. The council members are arrogant because they are intoxicated by their power; each is the ruler of a 250,000-person fiefdom. City bureaucrats are aloof because their jobs are protected by public employee unions, a circumstance that leaves them unaccountable, complacent, and lazy. The strength of public employee unions is a common complaint of secessionists: they complain that ‘municipal employee unions have control’ of the city, which “has caused higher salaries than the private sector, lack of privatization of City functions, and lack of work force reduction as the City’s budget fell” (Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association, 1997).

The two issues, fair share and inefficient government, are important because they form the basis for a common agenda around which the Valley VOTE coalition has come together. However, the two issues are also important because they constitute the primary face that Valley VOTE shows to the public. In characterizing what secessionists are after, the popular press regularly cites secessionists’ desire for ‘fair share’ and dissatisfaction with an inefficient city government. Valley VOTE, for its part, does nothing to discourage this characterization of its agenda, for they have successfully seized the ideological high-ground on both issues. Although secessionists’ desire to end the subsidy is a textbook example of the collective consumption arguments of the left-wing reorganization theorists, secessionists have successfully portrayed the perceived imbalance in collective consumption as an issue of ‘fairness’, arguing that it is ‘unjust’ that the wealthier Valley would have to support the poorer remaining Los Angeles. On the claim of an inefficient city government, the city itself recently admitted to its own shortcomings when both the Mayor and the City Council launched independent Charter Reform commissions whose mandate was to rehabilitate an outdated and cumbersome city charter. By allowing the popular press to portray the secessionist agenda in terms of these common goals, the two factions of Valley VOTE have been able to downplay the fundamental differences that flow from distinctly different agendas with respect to local growth.

#### *Where they diverge*

Despite these points of agreement, each wing of the Valley VOTE coalition also has its own distinct reasons for pursuing secession. The agenda unique to Valley VOTE’s business wing flows from its interest in promoting local growth and investment in the Valley. They complain that the Los Angeles City government is overly restrictive of business. They argue that business taxes are too high, the business permit process is unnecessarily complicated and lengthy, and land-use controls are excessive. As the standard-bearers for Valley economic growth, this wing of Valley VOTE protests that governmental restrictions make it difficult to attract new business

and growth to the Valley. Here they make the argument that Los Angeles' restrictions mean that the Valley is losing new capital investment to other, less restrictive cities in the region. A recent newsletter<sup>7</sup> from Valley VOTE asserts the following:

Businesses located in the San Fernando Valley pay significantly higher business taxes and fees than their competitors in each of the smaller independent cities that surround the Valley. According to the Annual Komont Report on the 'Cost of Doing Business in Southern California', the Los Angeles City has the highest business taxes in all of Southern California. For instance a business in the Valley that pays \$60,000 a year in business taxes could move to Burbank and pay \$667/year or Calabasas and pay \$1400/year, or Santa Clarita and pay virtually ZERO. Significant research shows that smaller cities are more efficient and less costly (Valley VOTE, 1998a).

As representatives of the Valley growth machine, this group feels that growth in the Valley is hampered by the City of Los Angeles. In pursuing secession this group hopes to establish a new city that is significantly more *laissez-faire*. By easing taxes, fees, and land-use restrictions they hope the new Valley city will be able compete with smaller nearby cities for new capital investment. Valley business groups believe a more *laissez-faire* Valley government would be a more pliant partner in a new, more localized Valley growth machine.

The homeowners wing of Valley VOTE differs sharply on the question of the new Valley government's relationship to growth. Unlike Valley business, homeowners find city land-use laws to be overly *permissive*, and hope to install more stringent codes for the new city. The desire to control growth is not an agenda that homeowners discuss commonly at Valley VOTE meetings, but they do discuss it regularly at their own board meetings. One of the chief complaints that homeowners groups have about the present city government is the lack of neighborhood-level control over land-use decisions. Presently, the territory of each homeowners association (HOA) is embedded in a much larger city council district (see Fig. 4). In Los Angeles, most land-use decisions are ultimately made by the council office. Therefore, most land-use decisions are made at a scale that is much larger than the territory of each HOA. As HOA organization and influence are largely confined to their own territory, HOAs are often unable to sway land-use decisions to their favor. Homeowners' desire to reorganize the city government stems partly from their frustration in this arena. As they are unable to control land-use decisions at the council-district scale to their satisfaction, homeowners seek a geographical devolution of land-use authority. They want the land-use authority to be decentralized from the city hall and given to the neighborhoods. Ideally, they would like to see the creation of elected 'neighborhood councils' that have binding authority over land-use decisions. In fact, this is precisely the proposal homeowners and others have

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<sup>7</sup> Newsletters are faxed to board members but at that point of time were not available to the general public.

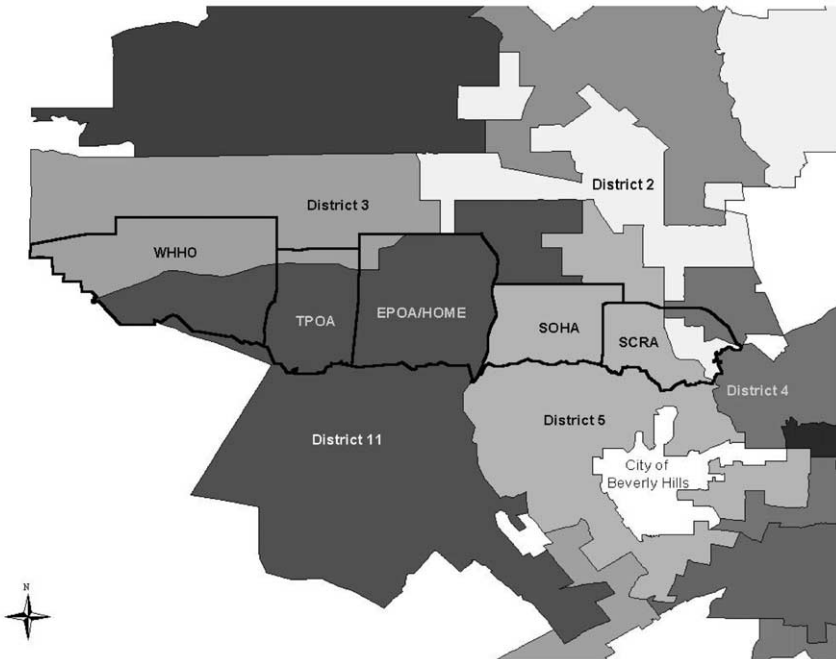


Fig. 4. Homeowners association boundaries with city council boundaries. Associations mapped are: Woodland Hills Homeowners Organization (WHHO); Tarzana Property Owners Association (TPOA); Encino Property Owners Association (EPOA); Homeowners of Encino (HOME); Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association (SOHA); and Studio City Residents Association (SCRA).

advanced during the recent charter reform process in Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> Such neighborhood councils would likely be based on the 35 existing planning districts in Los Angeles (see Fig. 5), and their territories would much more closely match that of HOAs than do the present city council district territories (compare Fig. 4 with Fig. 5). Homeowners hope that secession will enable them to construct a new Valley government that features such a neighborhood council system. Though local newspapers and other media have reported secessionists' desire for greater democracy and local control, little has been written about what that local control would be used for. For homeowners, greater local control means greater ability to pursue their slow-growth agenda both for their neighborhoods and the Valley as a whole.

Of course, elected neighborhood councils with binding land-use authority are reviled by pro-growth interests. They fear that parochial interests (homeowners chief among them) will seize any such councils and use them to practice sanctioned NIM-BYism, thereby choking off growth and land development all over the city. Clearly

<sup>8</sup> The last two years in Los Angeles have seen a flurry of efforts to rewrite the city's charter. Because it is an attempt to address criticisms of city government, many of which have been trumpeted by the secessionists, charter reform is widely seen as an attempt to diffuse secession.



Fig. 5. Homeowners association boundaries with city planning district boundaries. Associations mapped are: Woodland Hills Homeowners Organization (WHHO); Tarzana Property Owners Association (TPOA); Encino Property Owners Association (EPOA); Homeowners of Encino (HOME); Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association (SOHA); and Studio City Residents Association (SCRA).

any new Valley government cannot satisfy both wings of Valley VOTE. The business wing would recoil at the notion of neighborhood councils with any sort of real land-use authority, a key goal of homeowners groups. The homeowners wing would be horrified by a new government that is still more *laissez-faire* on land development and growth than the present government. This split over land-use regulation is fundamental, and is not likely to be resolved easily. The split goes right to the central fracture in the Valley VOTE coalition: it is a union of pro-growth and slow-growth interests.

However, because the split will be most destabilizing during the process of constructing the new Valley government, it is unlikely to hamper the secession effort. State law allows secessionists to put secession on the ballot without proposing a detailed structure for the new government. If secession passes, only then must the nuts and bolts of the new government be hammered out. Therefore, Valley VOTE has been able to forestall consideration of its most fundamental disagreement until *after* any secession vote. Evidence suggests that Valley VOTE realizes that the split exists and steers carefully around it when possible. A list of answers to the frequently asked questions prepared by Valley VOTE is revealing. To the question, "What would the new Valley city government be like?" Valley VOTE responds largely with platitudes. The new government should feature the following: increased citizen

involvement; excellence in providing public services; commitment to fiscal restraint; economic viability; equity and access for all; clear lines of accountability for performance; common sense policies based on the priorities of the citizens; and sound long-term planning (Valley VOTE, 1998b).

Only later in the answer does Valley VOTE hint obliquely at the real issue when it says, “the goal is to explore government that is responsive to the local needs of communities [i.e. homeowners’ desire to control development in their areas] while meeting the Valley’s regional needs [i.e. business’ need for economic growth]...” (Valley VOTE, 1998b). In other words, the goal is to establish a government that will diffuse the struggle over growth in the Valley. It is a goal that will be nearly impossible to achieve.

So the two wings of Valley VOTE do share significant common ground in their desire for secession. Their issues of convergence center on the question of collective consumption, exactly what the traditional literature on metropolitan political reorganization would predict. However, the sources of their divergence concern issues that lie beyond the politics of formal governmental structures. Because the two wings of Valley VOTE stand on opposite sides of the issue of urban growth, they have fundamentally different ideas about how to structure the geography of the new Valley city. The two factions agree when government reorganization is an end in itself — more geographically even collective consumption and more efficient government. However, they disagree strongly when government reorganization constitutes a means to an end. In seeking a government that will most effectively allow them to pursue their agenda for land development, each faction has a fundamentally different idea about the role the new government is to play in the politics of urban growth.

### **The opposition to secession**

It should be made clear at the outset that an analysis of the agenda of secession opponents is preliminary because opponents have mostly remained passive, waiting to see how far the secessionists will get.<sup>9</sup> If Valley VOTE is successful in getting a secession proposal through LAFCO and before the voters, secession opponents will likely emerge with a much clearer and forceful position. As of now, they have taken little action beyond stating their opposition. Despite this reticence, we can see the opposition to secession, like its support, as deeply embedded in the politics of urban growth.

There are two main elements to the opposition, both key elements in the region-wide growth machine. The first element could loosely be labeled regional land-based business interests. Institutions in this category are all regional growth proponents.

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews with leaders of the downtown business groups and city officials, as well as a review of their published positions, suggests they are not yet ready to make the details of their position fully public. Nevertheless, interview responses suggest a clear opposition to the possibility of Valley secession.

The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, which is the official regional business booster, opposes secession. The Central City Association, which is an organization that lobbies for land development in the downtown area but has many members with region-wide interests, has also taken a position against secession. The *Los Angeles Times* has taken a somewhat more active stance against secession. As many observers have pointed out, the *Times* has long been a leading regional booster (Gottlieb & Wolt, 1977). Moreover, the owners and editors of the *Times* have a history of land speculation and development in addition to publishing and so have long been an important part of the local growth machine. The *Times* has editorialized frequently against Valley secession, calling the idea ‘divisive’ and ‘a dismemberment’ and has characterized the secession movement as “an army of mercenaries...[trying] to take a sledgehammer to the nation’s second-largest city” (Editorial, 1999).

Although they have taken a mostly passive role so far, regional business interests are clearly against secession. Primarily, they worry that secession will further splinter land-use control in the region. The Los Angeles region, like many American metropolises, is a patchwork of municipal governments, each with its own set of land-use codes. To develop property in the region, regional land interests must negotiate a wide range of land-use regimes. Some municipalities toe the line for growth, but others are fiercely independent and can be thorns in the side of the regional growth machine. For regional business interests, Valley secession would mean breaking up the largest block of land-use uniformity in the region.<sup>10</sup> What is worse, if Valley secession is successful, it may open the door for other areas of Los Angeles to break away. The leader of a secession movement on the Los Angeles’ Westside, for example, says explicitly that his strategy is to let the Valley clear a trail through the local and state bureaucracy that his group can follow. Secession movements exist in many other areas of the city as well, in San Pedro, Venice, Mt Washington, Wilmington, and South Central. Such splintering would only intensify the variegated landscape of land-use regimes in the region.

In addition, regional business interests worry that secession will tarnish the global image of the region. Los Angeles has always been a city whose growth has depended heavily on image. At the beginning of the century the city was sold to frigid Midwesterners as a balmy paradise replete with palm trees, orange groves, and gentle sea breezes, a town where homeownership was the rule rather than the exception (Jacobs, 1966; Caughey & Caughey, 1977, pp. 209–211). At the turn of the millennium the importance of imagery for local growth has not diminished. Capital has become more mobile, markets have become more global, and competition between cities for investment has meant increasingly slick advertising campaigns to promote cities. In Los Angeles, where the 1990s have brought a devastating uprising, a severe earth-

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<sup>10</sup> Although the business wing of Valley VOTE functions as part of the regional growth machine, it is not similarly concerned with further fragmentation because it operates on a smaller scale than do regional business interests. If secession passes, Valley rentiers will still be confronted with just one land-use regime (one they hope will be more *laissez-faire*) while the regional growth interests will be confronted with an additional land-use authority for their regional-scale operations.

quake, destructive wildfires, and widespread flooding, business interests worry that Valley secession will serve as the capstone for a decade of image erosion.

Regional business interests are joined in opposing secession by their partners in the regional growth machine: local government. Mayor Richard Riordan has been the most vocal opponent of secession. He speaks frequently in the Valley and elsewhere, peddling the platitude that the city must not be divided because, as the local booster slogan goes, “together we’re the best, Los Angeles”. Riordan wears two hats in the local growth machine. He is the Mayor of Los Angeles, but he is also a longtime land speculator and local growth proponent. Mayor Riordan has served as a mouthpiece for the city’s business interests, working tirelessly to make the city as ‘business friendly’ as possible. As mayor, Riordan fears secession because it would severely diminish both his own power and the city’s revenue. A solid majority of the City Council joins the Mayor in opposing secession. Publicly they offer the same hollow arguments: that secession is divisive and offers no concrete solutions to the problem of an imperfect city government. Privately Council members join the Mayor in worrying that secession will diminish both their formal power and their ability to raise revenue. Like many central cities, Los Angeles has struggled fiscally since the retreat of the federal government under Reagan, and the removal of the relatively affluent Valley, government worries, will only worsen the revenue crisis. Some Councilmembers from the Valley, while they likely share the revenue concerns of their colleagues from the remaining city, have been reluctant to take a position on secession, perhaps with an eye toward running for office in the new city, should it come about. Opposing secession might cripple their electoral chances in a new Valley city. The city’s public employee unions, who secessionists decry as maintaining a stranglehold on city government, oppose secession for straightforward reasons. Like their counterparts in United Teachers-Los Angeles who oppose school district breakup along Valley-City lines, the city’s public employee unions worry that secession will divide their union in two, thereby diminishing their organizational strength.

### **The local implications**

If LAFCO approves the results of the secession study and the city’s voters choose secession, it will have several important implications locally. First, secession will highlight the deep geographical division that marks the city’s growth machine. Region-wide growth interests, based downtown, have difficulty maintaining a political consensus among more parochial groups, such as the business wing of Valley VOTE. Valley business interests often complain that the downtown leadership systematically ignores the Valley and makes only halfhearted attempts to lure investment there. Recently, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce published tourist maps of Los Angeles, and the maps omitted any mention of the Valley. The Valley’s *Daily News* quoted the president of the United Chamber of Commerce of the San Fernando Valley: “They [downtown interests] claim there is nothing for tourists to do in the Valley, except Universal Studios...that is why we’re creating our own maps and

developing our own marketing efforts” (McGreevy, 1997, p. 16). This geographical splintering suggests that the present regional growth machine is not up to the task of maintaining a political consensus for growth in a region so populous, diverse, and geographically far-flung (Purcell, 2000). Other failures, such as the famously inept subway project or the difficulty in siting a new Eastside reservoir, point to a local growth machine that has reached the limits of its ability to ensure permanent continuous growth in the region (Fulton, 1997; Warner & Molotch, 1995). If growth interests fail to hold the region’s largest city together, it will be the most spectacular evidence of their steady decline.

Also of interest, if secession comes to pass, will be the struggle after breakup. Valley VOTE has so far been able to delay detailed discussion of the structure of the new Valley government. However, eventually a real government will have to be hammered out. The pro-growth wing of Valley VOTE will push for a laissez-faire body that will rubber-stamp development. The slow-growth wing of Valley VOTE will push for a system of powerful local councils that will control neighborhood land use. The results of this struggle will reveal much about the balance of power with respect to growth politics in the Valley. Moreover, the results will lay down a template for the Valley’s future growth. If Valley homeowners can install institutional land-use bodies that they control, they would have gone a long way toward establishing something rarely found in Southern California: a powerful slow-growth regime. However, if pro-growth forces succeed in implementing a laissez-faire government, the Valley’s traditional sprawl will likely be transformed into a landscape of residential, commercial, and industrial densification. Whatever the outcome, the new Valley city would be a rich laboratory for urban political research for years to come.

### **Theoretical implications and conclusions**

The case of San Fernando Valley secession does not invalidate the traditional literature on metropolitan political reorganization. In fact, it serves as evidence for many of the literature’s claims. We can see in the secessionists’ fair share argument that secession is in part an attempt by the Valley to spatially capture tax dollars and avoid the service burden of the poorer remaining city. This motivation is exactly what the liberal view of the collective consumption wing of metropolitan political reorganization theory would predict: relatively wealthy areas of the metropolis erecting political barriers that prevent them from sharing a common fiscal destiny with poorer areas of the city. Moreover, we can see in the homeowners’ desire to devolve land-use authority to the local level that secession is in some sense an attempt to reassert local control in a far-flung metropolis. This motivation is exactly what the local-control wing of traditional metropolitan political reorganization theory would predict.

However, the traditional approach to metropolitan political reorganization offers us a surficial analysis of secession in two respects. First, the traditional approach fails to analyze the wider context of secession. Secession is not just an end in itself,

it is also an attempt to restructure the local-state arena in which growth politics in the Valley will play out. Groups pursuing a pro-growth or slow-growth agenda are using metropolitan political reorganization to help them achieve the growth outcomes that lie at the heart of their political project. Second, a focus on collective consumption and local control only gets at Valley VOTE's public face. It only reveals the agenda Valley VOTE has decided to share with the local media. Simmering under the agendas of collective consumption and local control is a struggle over growth. The Valley VOTE coalition would rather shield from public consideration the divergent agendas that flow from growth in order to avoid rending their tenuous alliance. The traditional approach highlights where Valley VOTE agrees: collective consumption and governmental reform. A focus on growth reveals their fundamental split, and it introduces a new set of non-state politics to the analysis of secession.

Moreover, failure to analyze the wider political context has consequences beyond Los Angeles. Reorganization in other metropolitan areas is similarly embedded in a wider political context. Talk of secession in North Fulton County, Georgia, e.g., is at least partly fueled by a desire to prevent Atlanta's growth agenda from consuming land in suburban areas of the county (Schrade, 1998). A wave of incorporations in the eastern part of the Seattle metropolitan area are fueled in part by local residents' desire to control rampant growth in the area (Johnson, 1999).

Finally, the implications of this approach to metropolitan political reorganization may go beyond just a rethinking of the traditional literature on reorganization. I think the case of Valley secession encourages geographers to more fully develop an analysis of the spatial nature of urban politics. That is because secession is a struggle that is spatially constituted on several different levels. Secession is overtly spatial in that it involves restructuring existing state territory. Moreover, the collective consumption approach highlights the attempt to spatially redistribute collective consumption goods within the metropolis. Further, the local control approach stresses that secession is an attempt to rework the geography of formal political power in the city. But seeing secession in terms of growth politics adds another layer to the spatiality of reorganization. It suggests that not only is reorganization itself a spatial politics (it is a restructuring of the territorial state), but the broader political context in which reorganization lies is also a struggle over space—one that involves how urban space should be used. Seeing reorganization thus as a spatial politics embedded in a wider spatial politics indicates that the politics of space are not incidentally present in the politics of reorganization (dependent, in this case, on the territoriality of the state), but are fundamentally salient at all levels of the issue. This finding suggests that the spatial character of reorganization is not incidental but fundamental; the spatiality of reorganization inheres in a wider politics that is a struggle over space. Therefore, this approach to reorganization should encourage researchers to look deeper into the spatiality of urban political issues with an eye toward making the claim that urban political struggles are not contingently spatial, but necessarily so.

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