

Comment on Scott A. Bollens's "In Through the Back Door: Social Equity and Regional Governance"

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Abstract

The resurgence in regionalism is not coming about primarily because cities and suburbs see themselves as interdependent competitors in the global economy, as argued in Scott A. Bollens's "In Through the Back Door: Social Equity and Regional Governance." Instead, enough communities are finding tax equity programs, land use measures, and cooperative governance in their own self-interest to create gentle progress toward regional equity. However, regionalism lags in ending concentrated poverty and racial segregation because few civil rights organizations are raising these issues as fundamental to a regional agenda. The race issue is not being raised because of lack of understanding and because of competing visions on how to do it.

Keywords: Growth management; Poverty; Urban policy

Scott A. Bollens argues that a leading impulse for regionalism in the 1990s was the realization that suburbs and central cities are economically interdependent and should work cooperatively toward common regional welfare on the basis of global competition. If this is so, he argues, we should witness an emergence of regional policies that combat the concentrated poverty, segregation, and place-based inequalities that impose significant costs on regions as a whole. He also suggests that there has been progress on regional equity, but that it has often come indirectly, or through the back door, rather than as an explicit effort.

In response, I believe that there has been a resurgence in regionalism, but that it has probably not come primarily from a sense that cities and suburbs are interdependent and must fight together in the global economy. Instead, the regional movement is growing because more and more communities are finding it in their own self-interest. For them, regionalism is a tool to combat ills ranging from community disinvestment to traffic congestion.

In contrast to Bollens's argument, I would say that to assess regionalism, we must consider it in several dimensions. Regionalism is about tax equity, regional land use planning, and cooperative governance. The degree of progress varies across these areas. In terms of taxes, the glass is half-full. For example, while not solely at the metropolitan level,

many states are making significant contributions to school district revenues. Equity arguments are at the forefront, not at the back door, of such efforts. But in terms of land planning and regional governance, the glass is not yet even half-full, although it is slowly filling. Individual regions are making progress, but there is considerably more to be done.

Regionalism lags in an important area—ending concentrated poverty and segregation. While this may be one of the most important goals of regional cooperation, it is by far the hardest to accomplish, and it is also the one that is receiving the least attention. More progress could be made if there were a better shared understanding of concentrated poverty and a stronger civil rights movement.

The political basis of the regional movement

Most of us feel intuitively—and want to believe—that interdependence and global competition are two reasons for the regional movement. But the basis of this argument is not yet strong enough and coherent enough to pass muster in academe (see Altshuler et al. 1999), much less create a powerful political argument that can knock the United States out of its city-suburban dichotomy.

As James Madison laid out in Federalist No. 10, at the core of a complex republic—however noble and high-minded—is faction and self-interest. In this light, effective political strategies often focus on making arguments that are in the self-interest of a majority of legislators. To this end, regionalism is an elegant solution that simultaneously responds to many complex problems. Among the other reasons for the rise of regionalism is the growing awareness that the region is the proper scale to address transportation and congestion issues, wastewater, the loss of open space, global competition, downtown redevelopment, and, of course, racial segregation.

Important to this discussion is the realization that there is no such thing as a suburban monolith. In fact, 40 percent of the population of the nation's largest metropolitan areas lives in "at-risk" suburbs, places that face growing social needs, aging or insufficient infrastructure, and stagnant tax resources. Another quarter lives in bedroom-developing suburbs, fast-growing places that are home to many middle-class families with children, but few jobs and small commercial tax bases. Just 7 percent of the population lives in what we call affluent job centers—suburbs with few social needs and a steady flow of jobs, high-end housing, and retail outlets. All types of communities are hurt by lack of cooperation. All benefit from regional reform (Orfield 2002). As these places, particularly the at-risk and bedroom suburbs, more

fully understand their position in terms of regional development, equity arguments will become more and more effective.

The regional movement is a multifaceted gemstone with strong support on many fronts, including transportation advocates, planners, environmentalists, and the good-government community. There is also growing support in the business, civil rights, and development communities. New allies appear every day.

In terms of the fiscal-equity components of regionalism, geographically, much of the support has come from central cities, older suburbs, and bedroom-developing suburbs. Very few, if any, high-fiscal-capacity suburbs have supported redistributive tax-sharing schemes. In terms of planning and governance, the support has been broader geographically when the proposals have been more general. As proposals become more specific and regulatory, support tends to come from the fully developed portion of the region.

The progress of the regional movement: A glass that is filling

Bollens's argument misses several intermediate steps. It moves in one step from the interdependence of regions and the need to compete globally to the end to segregation and concentrated poverty. I would argue that regionalism is a more complex process based on two prongs of action:

1. Inter-local tax equality with an emphasis on reinvestment
2. Land use planning and an emphasis on ending segregation and the concentration of poverty

There has been more progress on these goals than Bollens admits. However, he is quite correct in outlining the minimal progress on issues of racial segregation—an issue perhaps more at the center of regional disparities and more central to its resolution than any other.

Taxes

Although Bollens surveys the field on the regional tax mechanisms that have been enacted, he neglects to mention the significant revenue-sharing programs that exist in every state of the union to help equalize resources among schools and, to a lesser but important

extent, between cities. On average, 50 percent of school spending and 11 percent of local municipal budgets are based on revenue sharing, a system to distribute state aid to local governments (Orfield 2002). In terms of municipal finance, Wisconsin, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Minnesota, among others, have impressive statewide revenue-sharing systems. While these systems are not explicitly regional in nature, they have powerful regional equity effects. Moreover, they were accomplished legislatively on the basis of the same sorts of arguments that could (and did in Minnesota) advance a regional tax-sharing system. In the legislative passage of all of these systems, equity (along with property tax relief) was a central argument that was dealt with directly. I would argue to Bollens that the Rubicon has been passed here quite significantly.

Regional governance and land use planning

In term of regional governance, I argue that we have crossed the point of no return as well. We have regional governments in each of the nation's 25 largest regions. They span the spectrum, from the full-service regional governments of the Twin Cities and Portland, OR, to the weak tools of the highway department in many states. Several are in an intermediate stage—with mandatory or advisory land-use powers. What we need is not a revolution, but rather a reform of existing institutions. By moving from a loose Articles of Confederation-style relationship between communities to one modeled on the Constitution, we can encourage regional decision making on issues of regional concern while still allowing local governments to manage decisions best made at that level.

Progress is being made. For example, recently, Denver came close to a large-scale transformation of its regional governance system, and San Diego is moving quickly and quietly through significant regional reforms. In the mid-1990s, the Metropolitan Council in the Twin Cities moved from a \$40 million to a \$500 million budget as it consolidated all regional sewerage agencies and powerfully strengthened its control over local land use. Cincinnati is revisiting the powers of its metropolitan planning organization. Atlanta has created a powerful regional authority in the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. In many cases, race/equity lawsuits and federal equity and environmental legislation are shaping these outcomes. As I write, Detroit, one of the most racially divided regions in the nation, is creating a multicounty regional transit authority. One of the driving forces in this transformation was a multiracial, city/suburban church-based organization called MOSES (Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength). This movement is small, but growing.

In terms of land use, 16 states have adopted comprehensive statewide land use planning laws. Recent additions include Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania. Michigan will be next, and the number will continue to grow. In Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, tax equity was very much a part of the discussion. Wisconsin has significant equity laws and last session debated enabling legislation on regional tax sharing. As a part of its land use reform, Pennsylvania passed permissive tax-sharing legislation at the regional level. How do you classify all this? I would call it gentle progress on regional equity.

Problems of race and concentrated poverty

Race and concentrated poverty have not been comprehensively addressed as part of a regional agenda. Why not? The short answer is that few civil rights organizations are raising these as fundamental issues. I believe that if a strong, concerted voice raised the problem of intraregional racial inequality with some persistence, things would change. Why doesn't anyone raise the race issue? There are at least two reasons: lack of understanding and competing visions on how to do it.

Lack of understanding

Outside of a few scholars, government researchers, and small fair-housing organizations, there is no widely accepted, shared view of the existence or evils of concentrated poverty and segregation. Research shows us that the concentration of poverty is caused by racial discrimination in the housing market. Research also shows us how such poverty destroys the lives of children in poor schools by depriving them of opportunity, intensifies health risks and crime, and destroys the urban fabric and the fiscal base of cities (Massey and Denton 1994; Orfield 1997).

But few activists or politicians—much less the general public—think about it this way. They accept these neighborhoods on their own terms, apart from the pattern of metropolitan development. The problems, they reason, are the products of bad individual choices and lack of money and can be solved by better individual choices, more programs, and more money.

This lack of understanding is reinforced by the growing separation of the races. Many poor blacks and Latinos are isolated in racially segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods and have little contact with the world beyond their boundaries. Many do not know about the economic

opportunities associated with affluent suburban schools and neighborhoods—many have never been to the central business district. Whites, the most segregated of all ethnic groups, are living farther and farther away from these poor inner-city neighborhoods and see them mainly through the bloodthirsty and exploitative crime-weather-and-sports production we call the news. The suburban worldview does not include the metropolitan forces that cause the concentration of poverty.

A particularly sad part of this story involves the growing black and Latino middle class. By 2000, 54 percent of Latinos and nearly as high a percentage of blacks had moved to the suburbs in pursuit of the American dream. In their search for new homes, they are frequently the subject of subtle forms of racial discrimination, such as being steered to particular communities or being shown fewer units than white buyers.

When these new residents reach a critical mass in a neighborhood and its schools, many white home buyers, *perceiving* the community to be in decline, choose not to buy there, and over time, whites already living in the neighborhood move away. The consequent decline in demand causes housing prices to stagnate, and poorer individuals of all races move into the homes vacated by middle-class whites. Earlier perceptions become reality. In a short time, new middle-class migrants find themselves in the same kind of neighborhoods they sought to escape just a few years before. These patterns perpetuate both the outward expansion of social strain and flawed assumptions about the contributions of minority residents to a community.

If there was a broader understanding of what was happening, activist and political leaders might embrace it and there might be more change.

Competing visions

David Rusk has often told me that in dealing with issues of race in our society, there have always been two approaches—the soft path and the hard path. The soft path is less direct and hits issues more obliquely. It is more race neutral in its focus, generates less controversy, and generally gains more early support from philanthropies and the elite. Over time, however, the hard path—the more direct path—wins the day and converts many of the soft-path advocates to more substantive reform. The hard path takes direct aim at the core of these issues.

In our history, one of the first examples of this dichotomy was in the way reformers dealt with slavery. The hard-path abolitionists wanted to end slavery and treat blacks as citizens immediately. Advocates of the

soft-path “colonization” approach agreed that slavery was bad, but their solution, less direct and controversial, was to purchase slaves from their owners and return them to Africa or some suitable homogeneous colony. Leaving aside for a moment the preference of blacks themselves, this was financially and logistically impossible. Abolitionists were initially rejected by the American church infrastructure and nascent American philanthropy, but over decades of protest, creative confrontation, and persuasion, they took control of the antislavery movement in this country and ultimately prevailed (Mayer 1998).

Another example involves the different approaches of W.E.B. Dubois and leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—who called for immediate equality and acceptance in American life—and Booker T. Washington, who called for assistance from the majority group in creating a separate society for blacks. While Dubois brought up controversial issues like lynching and made direct calls for black equality, Washington de-emphasized controversial issues and concentrated on programs that would train blacks for lower-skilled work. While the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and other elite supporters of reform flocked to Washington, Dubois sat at the edge of ruin. But as was the case with the abolitionists, after years of advocacy, controversy, and persuasion, the ideas of Dubois and the NAACP became the spearhead of the litigation strategy that resulted in *Brown v. Board of Education* and, ultimately, the intellectual basis for the modern civil rights movement. The hard path eventually became the mainstream (Lewis 1993).

Today, with few exceptions, we have only a soft-path strategy for addressing racial segregation and concentrated poverty within metropolitan regions. In terms of civil rights, most large national organizations are dedicated to preserving the gains of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in terms of affirmative action, racial profiling, and ways to improve health care for blacks. Clearly, these are important issues, but with the exception of several smaller organizations like the Leadership Council on Metropolitan Open Communities in Chicago, and the Detroit NAACP, very few groups are taking on the substantive forces of regional segregation or housing discrimination underlying the day-to-day challenges many people of color face.

Another soft-path faction—community development—truly occupies the field of urban policy in America. Again, there is a small but growing core of organizations, including the national Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Trenton, NJ-based Isles, and the Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership, that are beginning to take on a regional playing field. But community development remains, by and large, a locally based movement focused on building low-income housing in the

poorest and most segregated neighborhoods of cities and older suburbs. This movement gives shelter to people who desperately need it, creates jobs, and sometimes employs ambitious disadvantaged youth. Outside of the central city, the movement is not political. It does not raise the issue of race or of concentrated poverty or racial segregation. It has a base of political power—albeit dwindling—in the law firms and construction companies that reap fees from its dedicated funding streams based on tax credits. But by focusing on in-place solutions to concentrated poverty, it has shown little effectiveness in improving the life chances of individuals, neighborhoods, or cities.

Bringing race and concentrated poverty to the forefront of regionalism

If there were a hard path to complement the soft path, if there were an organization that would begin to take on—head on—the issues of concentration of poverty and segregation, there would likely be an uproar. Raising the issue of race directly is one of the most controversial positions in American politics. Many political strategists believe that raising racial issues is not compatible with maintaining a political majority coalition (Edsall and Edsall 1992; Greenberg 1995; Judis and Teixeira 2002). They point to older, blue-collar suburbs in places like Macomb County, MI, where Reagan Democrats moved against the Democratic coalition because of racial issues. Recent efforts at deconcentration in Maryland exploded when residents of Essex and Dundalk, blue-collar communities outside Baltimore, rebelled against the policies of former U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros to help low-income families relocate to low-poverty suburbs. My own experience as a legislator in Minnesota suggests that the potential for demagoguery surrounds even a non-race-based regional fair housing bill (Orfield 1997).

In this light, it is important to realize first that major party leaders and statewide and national candidates do not create social movements around race, but rather mediate energy for change that is created below the surface. Abraham Lincoln was not elected president as an abolitionist; rather, he pledged to preserve slavery in the states where it existed. For most of his career, Lyndon Johnson opposed the bills he is now closely associated with—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But when social forces grew strong enough, he ultimately supported and signed the bills. Both Lincoln and Johnson mediated highly controversial grassroots movements that took center stage in American politics. Both gradually became stronger adherents of civil rights as forces on the fringe moved to the center of the political stage.

Second, it is critically important for older struggling suburbs to be positioned correctly on a regional fair housing bill. In the Twin Cities, “at risk” suburbs, communities that constituted the largest single suburban block, defensively supported regional fair housing. They realized that their schools and neighborhoods were changing and could see that they would follow the same path of decline and resegregation that had occurred in central-city neighborhoods a generation before. They took the position that if the newer suburbs did not build more affordable housing, they would be overburdened by too much of it. In this light, a regional fair housing bill was a way for them to remain stable and remain integrated instead of becoming resegregated (Orfield 2002).

Finally, polling about civil rights issues clearly shows that the white public is more clearly supportive of race-oriented legislation that appears to provide minority groups with the same rights as whites than legislation perceived to be creating special privileges. The latter includes special funds for community enrichment and affirmative action programs, where whites often perceive competition for scarce resources or imagine reverse discrimination. Fair housing legislation based on facts showing that blacks and Latinos are denied the rights that whites have to move to the suburb of their choice could make a stronger case to whites than efforts to protect affirmative action or create special funding for poor individuals and neighborhoods.

Particularly compelling in this regard is the discrimination that black and Latino middle-class households experience as they move into the suburbs. Here, minority citizens who have played by the rules and are often more educationally and financially successful than their potential new neighbors are steered away by real estate agents or are denied credit or admission by banks and sellers. Perhaps a black or Latino police officer, accountant, schoolteacher, or doctor, denied access to the community of his or her choice, could be a potent new civil rights symbol to rally around.

Make no mistake, a more direct movement—one that effectively raises the issues of concentrated poverty and segregation—would be highly controversial. Initially, it would be misunderstood, and even criticized, by the centrist and conservative parts of the existing regional movement. There would be rivalries for public attention and support. If the issues were raised incorrectly—without a broad base in the suburbs—there could be a serious setback.

But ultimately, a more direct path based on strong facts—facts that emphasize access to equal rights (as opposed to special privileges), emphasize the benefit to older suburbs, and have the support of persuasive, persistent leaders—would begin to change the center of the

regional movement. This could take some time. The abolitionist and the civil rights movements took a decade or more to build up a head of steam. In the meantime, other important progress on taxes, land use, and governance can help set the stage. But some day, when core areas of concentrated poverty are gone—just like the poll tax, segregated public accommodations, and slavery—we will wonder why good people in a democracy ever allowed them to exist at all.

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