CHAPTER 7

Contested Conceptions of Pluralism Between Cities and Congress over National Civil Rights Legislation

Thomas Ogorzalek

[Lynch mobs] protected life and property, at least in a way, and made those sections of the country, where there was no organized government, very safe sections in which to live.

—Rep. Hatton Sumners (D-TX), 1934

The frontier days are gone, and few of us familiar with the rigors of living in that era are likely to bewail its departure.

—Rep. John Rooney (D-NYC), 1949

In December 1963 the new US president, Lyndon Johnson, and House Speaker John McCormack were hitting the phones to wrangle votes for a cotton subsidy bill. Southerners were in strong support, but the urban wing of the party was restive—for decades southerners had supported only pieces of the urbanites’ agenda while accepting a lion’s share of federal largesse. Johnson and McCormack called perhaps the most influential big-city power broker in the party, Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago, who sat at the helm of the Cook County Democratic Party as well as the nation’s second-largest city. McCormack and Johnson tried to bring Daley (and thereby the Chicago delegation) on board. Daley’s response was to suggest a logroll: “[We’ll] be alright
if they support any part of our civil rights program or the tax bill, but [we] won’t support anything and then not get a commitment back from them. . . . We’ve been doing too much of that.” Knowing that southerners would never support civil rights (they had done everything to oppose big-city efforts at racial liberalism for a generation), Daley went further to suggest the most aggressive legislative strategy: using a discharge petition to push the landmark civil rights bill into the congressional agenda, raising the issue even against urgings of his national party leaders.1

Of course, the prevailing reputation of Daley and the Chicago machine on race is less rosy. During the same time that he and his lieutenants in Washington had supported (vain) attempts to pass civil rights legislation, they had opposed racial integration and equality in Chicago nearly as consistently. No account of Daley gets very far without addressing his fraught relationship with black Chicagoans.2 As a young man Daley developed his political chops in the Hamburgs street gang, who were largely responsible for an infamous 1919 race riot.3 His Bridgeport neighborhood, still the beating heart of the Irish-led local Democratic organization, was famous for its racial turf defense, including both intense use of restrictive covenants and mob actions against would-be integrators. As mayor, Daley distanced himself from these positions, but throughout the machine’s heyday racial segregation of the city increased, driven in large part by the racist implementation of local housing policies. Most notoriously, Daley encouraged officials responding to unrest in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. to open fire on looters, an order that resonated with hundreds of racially conservative whites near and far; one Bridgeport resident wrote the mayor a note with the informal estimate that the area was “all pro, no con” in agreement with this decision.4 After Daley’s death, the machine’s latent tensions led to a decade of open racial rancor in Chicago politics.

However, local Democrats also worked for racial progress, supporting national civil rights both publicly and privately. The city had a fair employment law long before 1964 and advocated for national fair employment practices (FEP) for decades. At a 1961 hearing on employment discrimination, Daley argued that “Chicago is a melting pot city, as you know. Chicago was built by the people of many lands, of every race, creed, color, and ethnic origin. . . . Negroses are not the only segment of our population that has benefited from the city’s [fair employment] policy, for nationality and religious groups benefit when the employer adopts fair employment practices.”5

Daley’s “melting pot” metaphor is inapt, because organizations such as his recognized and supported ethnic, racial, and national origin identities rather
than melting them away. Even the largely assimilated native-born white ethnics of Chicago’s outlying working-class districts maintained their group identities (as well as their newly inclusive construction of a white racial identity) in both daily and political life. Such group consciousness is still never far from the surface in Chicago and other racially and ethnically heterogeneous cities. Still, Daley’s conception of urban intergroup dynamics reveals an important theme in twentieth-century race relations, namely that they were tough to manage and that the goal wasn’t colorblindness. Rather, consciousness of difference and ethnicity was always on the tongues of urbanites and their leaders as they sought to navigate the diverse terrain of the midcentury city. They thought of the city when they thought about race, and they thought of city-specific solutions to racial challenges. This political thinking led to a paradox of city politics and race that Daley exemplifies: The traditional party organizations that controlled politics in so many cities were simultaneously ethnically exclusive hierarchical organizations and forces for civil rights liberalism—conservative at home in the streets, liberal in the halls of Congress. What explains this divergence, often by the same people or organizations? In this chapter, I bring together two strands of research on American politics to attempt to better understand one important puzzle of our racial politics: how our cities are simultaneously well-known sites of deep, persistent racial inequalities of many types and the source of our best ideas (and staunchest political support) for ameliorating those same inequalities. In American politics, there is probably no area in which ideas have been as important and in flux so much as in race. A leading account of American political development contends that many of the most important and recurrent conflicts in American history are best understood as contests between opposed “racial institutional orders”—shifting, rival coalitions seeking, in the simplest form, either to advance racial egalitarianism or to strengthen white supremacy. In the case of city politicians, however, the reality was (and is) often more complicated. The same political coalition, whose members both ruled the city and represented it nationally, simultaneously acted as both a progressive and regressive force in American racial politics. To help explain how and why, I will focus on the idea of cultural pluralism as informed by the conditions of city life and deployed by members of locally rooted traditional party organizations at different levels of government. Locally, they were institutions that upheld conservative visions of the city based on segregation and hierarchy. Nationally, however, they were the most consistent defenders of a vision of civil rights liberalism that was rooted only in cities during the Long
New Deal, in the run-up to the midcentury racial realignment. Before considering how these ideas can fit together, I will contrast the city leaders’ local and national attitudes toward race.

Race and Local Stratification

The first side of the contrast has to do with cities’ well-known history of racial conflict and hierarchy. In short, before the era of white flight, local officials of all stripes—Democratic or Republican, machine boss or reformer—were notable for their nonresponsiveness to African Americans and other racial minorities. The close cohabitation of so many new arrivals amplified the governance challenges faced by the burgeoning metropolis, often spurring group rivalries. Local government was often biased toward in-groups as well in ways consistent with the racial ideologies of the day. Across a wide range of policy areas—private and public-sector hiring, service provision, schooling, public safety, and others—African Americans were especially deprived. Discrimination and reinforced hierarchy were strongest in housing policy in which a separatist ideology informed a mix of local and national institutions, which in turn reinforced and strengthened existing individual attitudes about neighborhood-level diversity and members of other groups. This coalescence of institutional and personal practice created the starkly delineated racial demography of all twentieth-century American cities. Geographic separation strengthened political marginalization: The group territoriality of representation led local politics everywhere to take on an ethnoracial basis (with less emphasis on class), and nonwhites, who were more segregated than other groups (such as different ethnic whites) suffered the most because underprovision of services could take on the same geographic basis as membership in the dominant organization.

Where African Americans were incorporated into political organizations, it was typically as junior partners due in part to the timing of their arrival in northern cities and their political alliances but also to prevailing prejudices. Typically, co-opted peripheral-bloc leaders served as loyal organization members, delivering particularistic goods rather than seeking systemic change. This peripheral position in local organizations meant less access to the most valuable benefits (both personal and policy-related) available to core members and constituencies, and when electoral wins were comfortable enough, this marginal constituency was held captive with policy leftovers.
While there is still debate over which kinds of city leaders were less responsive to African American communities’ interests and preferences, the importance of local governance in both political marginalization and social inequality for minority groups (especially African Americans) is clear.

**Cities and National Racial Liberalism, 1920–1963**

Local politics in large cities was rooted in hierarchical ethnic and racial identities, and nonwhites were forced to the bottom of this hierarchy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite the resilience of local hierarchy, however, this era also saw a new idea regarding racial liberalism emerge from the group dynamics of city life. Over the course of the Long New Deal, race became associated with cities in political discourse. Racial issues were not particularly urban before the 1920s, because until then the typical referent groups for national race relations (African Americans and indigenous groups) lived mainly in rural areas. With the Great Migration of the twentieth century, however, black Americans became a significant (though initially still fairly small) presence in urban places, and arguments made in defense of racial liberalism took on an urban character that was not present in earlier discussions.

To illustrate how the urban liberal position on race developed, we can examine statements made by members of Congress during committee hearings, which provide context for the ideas underlying more discrete actions such as roll call votes. Because participation in hearings requires extra effort, the record reveals members’ priorities and does away with the ambiguity sustained by silence. The give-and-take structure of these meetings reveals attitudes by members of Congress toward others’ views and affords opportunities for spontaneous exchange. Unlike floor debate, hearings also include participants from civil society, adding further information about allies and foes.

In hearings on racial issues and policy proposals during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, members of Congress from urban areas articulated support for the racially liberal position rooted in urban experience. Participation in these hearings during the New Deal was largely the domain of conservative southern and city Democrats. The liberal position was disproportionately urban and over time became disproportionately urban Democrats, with the Republicans remaining largely silent. The hearings naturally also included many more witnesses who were not members of
Congress; the overwhelming majority of these witnesses were liberal urbanites, especially on fair employment proposals.

Urban New Dealers consistently and assertively engaged with southerners on civil rights. National race and civil rights legislation began with antilynching legislation that was considered repeatedly but never passed into law over the ensuing decades. The original bill was introduced by Leonidas Dyer, a St. Louis Republican whose district included many African Americans and was the site of a major race riot in 1919. Support for antilynching legislation at this point was articulated as a universalist understanding of rights and African Americans’ worthiness of full rights and citizenship. In a typical argument in favor of the antilynching law, Senator William B. McKinley (R-IL) argued in 1926 that

Although he [the African American] has been in possession of (political and civil rights) for relatively so short a time he has shown himself to be worthy of them. As a free man he has always been amenable to reason and persuasion; as a citizen he has uniformly been a patriot, and as a voter he has consistently aligned himself with the intelligence, the efficiency, the administrative ability, and the forces that stand for order and property. What can be said of any other group of our fellow citizens?

McKinley’s argument appeals to abstract principles of citizenship in defense of rights and full protection by the state and does not make reference to a lived environment or social context in which rights or citizenship may be exercised. Similarly, at a 1921 hearing about the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), Bostonian Peter Tague argued (after a trip through the South) that “the rights of citizens throughout that section of the country . . . had been violated, and they had not been protected in those rights which are allowed and given to them under the Constitution of the United States.”

At the same time, however, urban members of Congress were developing a new position on race relations that was distinctively urban: civil rights liberalism was the best way to handle this issue in a big-city context, and other legislators should defer to that city position on this potentially divisive issue. While the residents of these cities were divided over race at home in the streets, this division was not represented in congressional debate. These representatives articulated a set of three distinctively urban justifications for
racial liberalism: a recognition of pluralism, the usefulness of legislated social regulation, and the danger of racial conflict to social peace.

Most relevant to the focus of this volume is articulation by members of Congress of group pluralism and the importance of group identity as opposed to a strictly liberal individualism. This new argument relied on analogies to groups with experiences similar to those of African Americans but that were typically not the primary subjects of the legislation under consideration. Thus, attacks on lynching and the southern racial order included references to religious minorities such as Jews and Catholics, who were generally less exposed to lynching but who might become allies because they faced prejudice from the white Protestant mainstream. For instance, as early as 1921, Thomas Ryan (R-NYC) argued against the KKK that “any organization that is anti-Catholic, anti-Negro, anti-Jew, and against the foreign element in this country, which comprises over 25 per cent of the voting strength of the country, is really a menace to the community.”

Ryan included Catholics and Jews in the same list as African Americans, even though at this point these groups shared little besides their relatively marginal social status within American society. While Tague’s argument above might resonate with a conservative or a liberal because of its reverence for the Constitution and individual rights, Ryan’s would have been more controversial outside of the polyglot cities both because it understands groups as a basis for political and social inclusion and because of the actual groups he names as promising analogues. After all, for those who successfully sought to restrict immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe (and elsewhere) during this era, including the KKK itself, the transformation of American demography was itself a “menace to the community.”

Reference to other marginalized groups would later become a theme in the urban argument for FEP legislation in the 1940s. Arguing for FEP, Adolph Sabath (D-IL, Chicago) noted that “Jews, colored, and . . . minority groups in wide variety throughout the country . . . are the victims of unjustified local prejudice (and) actual discrimination.” Thomas Scanlon (D-PA, Pittsburgh), a career union official, declared that “bad as it is, discrimination against a man because he belongs to a union is not nearly as evil as discrimination because a man is a Negro, a Jew, a Catholic, or because his ancestors came from another country.” Victor Anfuso (D-Brooklyn) also emphasized pluralism (as opposed to straightforward racial justice for individual citizenship) as Americanism when defending broad civil rights legislation. “Our country
is comprised of people who come from all races, religious beliefs, and national origins. All of them have made important contributions toward the development of the US as a great Nation and toward shaping its destiny. . . . I do not believe in the superiority of one race or one nationality group over another."

Each of these city representatives, coming from a local traditional party organization and each having local black allies (though very few black constituents themselves), articulated a view of racial liberalism that was multicultural and tied to the experiences of nonblack marginalized groups concentrated in cities. Such arguments could be persuasive to listeners who were ambivalent about racial equality but might identify themselves as the object of similar discrimination. Roman Pucinski (D-IL, Chicago) added that in Chicago “8 out of 10 workers suffer some form of discrimination . . . [and] therefore this committee is trying to look (beyond) racial discrimination, tragic and lamentable as racial discrimination may be.” In this articulation, controversial antidiscrimination legislation primarily targeting African Americans was presented as also benefiting religious and national-origin minorities. This urban understanding of difference in which almost everyone is importantly “different” in addition to cities’ historical experiences in dealing with new groups made racial liberalism the city position on these issues and softened the potential downside for taking what might have been riskier positions if articulated as strictly black-white racial issues.

Two other arguments with urban sensibilities were articulated in support of federal civil rights. First, urban members of Congress framed federal intervention as desirable and effective when local officials were unable or unwilling to act in general. Against rural representatives and southerners who typically (and fairly cynically) argued that the horrors of lynching and racial inequality could only be overcome by a generations-long process of education and norm changing, city representatives often made analogies to other areas of regulatory intervention and the power of legislation to shape behavior and change minds. For them, federal lynching laws could establish new norms regarding the acceptability of racial violence, a logic later extended to employment discrimination. Again, city representatives, coming from traditional party organizations, representing cities (but not districts) with sizable black populations, voiced faith in the power of state interventions to alter norms in favor of pluralism.

Second, the urban perspective on the relationship between racial liberalism (or at least nondiscrimination) and the basic public order was different from that voiced by southerners and rural representatives. Southerners and
their allies emphasized the importance of segregation for maintaining social peace, as Charles Bennett (D-FL) argued in 1949 when he acknowledged that “they are not perfect, but I personally feel that race relationships are better in the South than they are anywhere else in the country... You will find a lesser percentage of race riots, less hard feeling, and less misunderstanding in the section of the country where I live than anywhere else in the country.”

Even when we see through claims of black satisfaction with the existing state of affairs, this statement reveals Bennett’s basic belief that public order was more compatible with the prevailing arrangements of racial domination. In the large urban spaces of the North, with their continual upheaval and dense populations, this was unpersuasive. There, deep discontent was understood as a time bomb, and when riots did occur, they were far costlier than in less developed areas. Accordingly, enforcement of nondiscrimination was seen as necessary for keeping social peace, not for upending it. Representatives from cities’ own local FEP boards (several cities and states had implemented their own permanent boards by 1949) advocated on behalf of a national law, adding to the previous arguments the idea that FEP was an important measure to keep the “powder keg” of race from exploding in their cities. This urban perspective was clear and also clearly urban: state regulations against discrimination and institutions to oversee their enforcement help resolve intergroup conflicts. Such resolution is much more important in urban areas, where violence is more costly, can involve more people, and cannot be quelled as easily as a rural uprising. Coming up with ways to avert such violence and actively manage group relations in the context of an inexorably changing status quo, rather than trying to reinforce a more static one, was the urban approach to race.

Together, the consciousness of group difference as something to be managed rather than dreaded, faith in legislation to reorder social practices, and support for some amelioration rather than outright oppression (or simply lower confidence that oppression could be effectively applied) combined to form the urban position on civil rights. The place basis of the main positions taken on race are reflected in the quotes that lead off this chapter. When Hatton Sumners defended lynching as a kind of traditional frontier democracy, he made an argument that would not have been accepted in a city. In cities, such spontaneous popular violence sometimes did erupt, often in defense of the established racial order. But under urban conditions, such acts were seen from above as a threat to the community’s well-being, not a defense of it. John Rooney, then a young congressman from the Brooklyn Democratic organization, said
seemingly in reply (though fifteen years later) that few would bewail the passing of the frontier days. In an America obsessed with the mythologies of the rugged frontiersman, such a statement entails at least a little controversy.

Rooney was arguing on behalf of fair employment legislation, which (like city Democrats’ efforts at antilynching measures) would fail before southern obstruction. He argued that the interdependence of modern urban life made the institutions and practices of the frontier obsolete and that it was time to embrace the city perspective, including the pluralism and rules it entailed. In this respect, Rooney voiced a city position, on a city issue, in support of allies in his city delegation.

Rooney and his colleagues from similar local traditional organizations were the heart of the era’s Democratic Party. They brought a new style and idea of community to national politics, one of group accommodation and bargaining that was expansive enough to (imperfectly) include African Americans as well. Their local ties and organization made their commitment to group pluralism strong enough to withstand the racist pushback within their national party (and within their cities).

Along with the speech acts above, one very important “nonobservation” should be noted. In Congress during this time, urban racial conservatism was absent. The record of hearings about civil rights during this era reveals no city representative from outside the South opposing the liberal position on the issue in question. This is crucial because of the racial division that was continually manifest in the streets and sometimes quite central to these cities’ politics. Although they lacked the elaborate legal architecture of white supremacy constructed in the southern states and despite their sometimes self-righteous pride at not being as racist as southerners, many northern urbanites actively resisted integration, and many more harbored serious doubts about the prospect of close. But this division or ambivalence about the important changes afoot in national race relations was not reflected in the record of how urban places represented themselves in the nation. Urban representatives and their local allies articulated a position that would manage racial conflict by likening African Americans, at least rhetorically, to other newcomer groups and would seek to establish and sustain institutions to manage potentially explosive social conflict. They also redefined racial issues in ways that were directly relevant to urban life—focusing on the plurality of groups, on the usefulness of new rules for changing social norms, and on the grave danger of not finding ways to manage inevitable change (as opposed to trying to resist it or relying strictly on privately or individually evolving attitudes to deal with it).
This liberalism became the core of the city position on racial issues during this era, which would be reflected in the voting records of urban representatives on controversial issues, and in the later “Blue” alignment dominated by city representatives.

What to make of this double position by urbanites, of sustaining racial hierarchy at home while pushing for civil rights in the halls of Congress? It is possible that these national positions were cheap talk, delivered to a Congress they knew would be obstructed by southern recalcitrants. But they also knew that the talk wasn’t cheap—racial conservatives were angry about these civil rights pushes, and the use of hearings and the discharge position meant that urban representatives were bringing these issues to the agenda and risking the cohesiveness of their national coalition. City representatives were working this very question out when they spoke about race in a new way during this era. We can get a glimpse of the answer by considering the divergent approaches as the political extensions of variant species of the idea of cultural pluralism that had emerged in the preceding decades.

**Cultural Pluralisms and City Governance**

To see the ideas behind city representatives’ positions on civil rights, we should visit the long era of urban growth before the Long New Deal. American cities at the turn of the twentieth century presented all kinds of new governance problems, such as rampant corruption, unprecedented population size and density, toxic pollution, rapid technological change, and on and on. It is these unprecedented challenges, all intersecting and right on top of each other, that make cities such fascinating objects of inquiry. What made the American cities of the mid-twentieth century particularly difficult to govern—relative even to their European counterparts, who were also rapidly growing and industrializing—is that American cities were made of persons arriving from all over the country and the world, creating polyglot centers in which not only interests but also entire worldviews contended. In the framework articulated in Chapter 1 of this volume, this nineteenth-century mass in-migration disrupted the urban status quo, and the idea of cultural pluralism provided a new ideological framework for city government. Decades later when civil rights questions reappeared on the national agenda and civil rights took on greater importance outside the South, this urban idea for managing group difference was used to argue for national civil rights—though the
interpretation of cultural pluralism had a different policy valence on the Hill than it did in the streets.

The twinned political insights of this era were, first, that rapid social change meant that maintaining order was very difficult and, second, that the diversity of the modern polis meant that the age-old “vision of a politics that was both inclusive and consensual” was bound to fail.26 Political order has always been fundamental to authoritative action, especially for local governments during an era of dynamic city growth. Leaders of the era tried to project an image of stability and progressive development in order to attract investment as cities competed with each other for regional and national primacy.27 The second insight, however, undermined the very basis on which order had traditionally been achieved—an articulation of a common good based on significant shared interests and experience. This had historically been achieved by exclusion of various classes (including women, newcomers, and workers) from political decision making and through a basic common worldview shared by those who could participate.28 This was no longer democratically practicable in cities such as New York, where “cultural differences combined with class resentments made common ground unimaginable.”29 In such a context, political entrepreneurs took on the challenge of developing a new practice of politics rooted in interest groups, material exchange, and organizations to coordinate elites who acted as power brokers for geographically based constituencies.30 Thus, machine politics was rooted not (or at least not only) in venal self-interest but also in a realistic recognition of cultural pluralism, which was reflected in a specifically political pluralist vision of how to provide order and make policy decisions.

The cultural and ethnic differences of urbanites would have been obvious to anyone walking the streets of American cities and were a primary concern for many of those attempting to govern them. Indeed, racially diverse and divided cities became a primary concern for many of those attempting even to simply understand America itself, as the assumption of a heritage shared with the founders no longer held for those who now clamored for full membership in American democracy.

Social and political theorists of the era did not always agree on what the underlying nature of diversity was or on the proper way to address it. These theorists elaborated understandings of cultural pluralism that were not all egalitarian, and these divergent ideas about intranational difference can help us understand the seeming paradoxes of cities’ representatives over time. Pluralism was an alternative to both melting pot assimilation and authoritarian
Anglo-Saxonism in that its proponents sought to “acknowledge ethnic difference as a fact of twentieth-century American life, and to recognize it as a virtue,” but the role of groups and their relative positions varied significantly across conceptions. For philosopher Horace Kallen, the fundamental assumptions of now-debunked race science led to a vision of enduring, stratified ethnic hierarchy. In his famous essay “Democracy vs. the Melting Pot,” Kallen articulated a vision of ethnicity in which group hierarchies are resilient because group differences are biologically heritable, each generation has to be re-Americanized, and the subaltern can never really catch the dominant groups.

Alternatively, John Dewey espoused a cultural pluralism more consonant with a contemporary liberal position: each group and tradition had something important and distinctive to contribute, and together the various strains of tradition are “transmuted into authentic Americanism.” In this vision, groups contributed to the broader society (as instruments do to an orchestra); personhood was thus more malleable for Dewey than for a biological essentialist such as Kallen.

Each of these pluralisms described different aspects of life in American cities. However urbanites conceived it, pluralism was a useful concept for understanding and managing city life and provided a commonsense language through which urban leaders could acknowledge group claims. In local politics, group consciousness became associated with group politics in which segregation and enclave life heightened group rivalries. In national politics, the city fought on a different plane—against southern repression and for a citywide position of managing intergroup conflict, which required at least basic elements of the civil rights agenda.

**Ideas and Organizations**

The different valences of cultural pluralist politics—local hierarchy and national egalitarianism—deployed by the “new stock” of traditional organization urban politicos of the midcentury do not sit nicely within a framework emphasizing competing racial policy alliances. The machines and their adherents were simultaneously fighting and supporting segregation and white supremacy. Political scientists Desmond King and Rogers Smith allow that although racial policy alliances or political orders may not be consciously constructed, members of these orders tend to be united by “agreements on the basic way to resolve the fundamental racial questions of their eras.”
But if we consider the basic “ways” to be egalitarian transformation or the retrenchment of white supremacy, it is not clear which order to put the urban machines in—they seem to disagree with themselves and everyone else. Did the machines and their adherents want separation of the races or didn’t they? Did they want black political empowerment? More practically, were they with the NAACP and other civil rights activists (the anchor organizations of the transformative egalitarian order) or against them? It depends where you look—urbanists would probably say against, but scholars of national politics would see them on the same side in every civil rights issue.

King and Smith’s racial orders framework has helped scholars map the place of racial ideologies in American politics. Crucially, it emphasizes the separability and opposition of actors, ideas, and institutional orders in American politics. As usual, the story is more complicated. One of the most insightful amendments to the racial orders approach is provided by Skowronek, who argues that the deployment of an idea should not be considered separately from the precise policy goal being pursued—this allows us to better understand seemingly paradoxical positions taken on either side of a racial issue that is ostensibly about groups. The sides are not always clear, the ideas deployed in pursuit of goals are malleable, and specific policy context matters.

Something similar happens in our cities. Pluralism was an inescapable fact of modern city life, but this does not mean that the practitioners of pluralist politics saw cosmopolitan transcendence of group identities as the end goal or that they believed that all groups would contribute equally to the new Americanism. The hierarchical organizations described repeatedly by scholars of urban politics were not managed by John Dewey; rather, they were the creations of the same kinds of men who would riot, race-bait, and show group favoritism in their governance—men such as Richard J. Daley and his machine. In the cities, their idea of pluralism was closer to Horace Kallen’s, recognizing the legitimacy of democratic participation by marginal groups (itself a major advance for the time) but simultaneously operating from a seat of power to sustain group stratification. In Congress, these organizations supported positions that were inclusive and supported civil rights. But in both places they were pluralists, putting groups alongside the individual as the fundamental unit of politics.

Reconsidering how these actors sat at a kind of hinge in American racial politics—connected to transformative egalitarians nationally but hierarchical racists locally as civil rights worked its way into the center of American political life—can help us understand the nature of antiracist coalitions. Racial
politics is messier than the racial orders perspective might lead us to believe; actors and institutions can uphold white supremacy even as they work toward transformative egalitarianism. This can happen across policy issues or across levels of the federal system. Local party bedfellows were just as strange as the national Democratic coalition—but they did not become estranged. They maintained organizational cohesion despite apparent ideological incoherence, embracing different versions of pluralism depending on the setting.

Organizations that were not dedicated to racial egalitarianism and were often in direct conflict with the black newcomers in their cities muddy the water of racial orders in American politics, particularly the notion of a Manichean ideological antiracism pitted against white supremacy. As landmark accounts such as that by Eric Schickler have demonstrated, ideological interest groups such as the NAACP, ADA, and the CIO focused elite attention on these issues and brought support for civil rights into the very meaning of liberalism during this time. The national urban cohesion on civil rights was not dependent on shared antiracist ideology; however, civil rights groups frequently campaigned locally against the same mayors who were on their side in national politics. Pluralisms rooted in city life were developed decades before their more inclusive versions were incorporated into national liberalism. These ideas laid the groundwork for inclusive national politics but also for local hierarchies and organizations based on the idea and practice of such pluralisms linked city representatives to other parts of their city and made them more likely to agree with their local allies’ positions, a pattern that was especially important on potentially divisive issues like race.

Further, pluralism played a slightly different role in the urban position on civil rights than in the ideological liberal position. For cultural pluralists, recognition of difference and fluency in group-identity appeals often served to uphold the political-economic status quo, sometimes even directly undermining more revolutionary appeals. For at least some of the ideological liberals (especially the CIO’s core), embrace of racial egalitarianism was a way to build class solidarity across racial groups. In the end, the project worked halfway. As Lizabeth Cohen’s classic account shows, white ethnic identities became less salient over time, but African Americans still not been fully welcomed into this group despite the best efforts of ideological activists. Only in national representation by city leaders were local divisions transformed into cohesive positioning on racial issues.

The coalition voicing support for racial liberalism was less a coherent institutional order than an uneasy alliance that deployed new arguments
about city life to justify civil rights policy, not because they were all selflessly committed to helping defend minority rights or obliterate whiteness as a governing principle but instead because African Americans were better allies than the Dixiecrats and because their idea of the pluralist city guided their thinking. This is encouraging for those who would promote the rights of vulnerable or unpopular minorities, for such political-institutional links may help provide support for such changes without reliance on saints or altruists. Programmatic antiracists played a key role and set the liberal agenda in many instances, but they worked through institutions that were not themselves programmatically antiracist, merely politically pragmatic and cognizant that group difference was part of city (and national) politics. And crucially, it was the powerful political organizations at the hinge—of local and national politics, of social transformation and traditional community—that helped drive national change.