



# Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901-1920

*Bradley Robert Rice*

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Although the commission government movement is often treated by historians as an element of the reform surge of the Progressive Era, this is the first full-scale study of the origins, spread, and decline of the commission idea.

Commission government originated in Galveston, Texas, where business leaders conceived the plan as a temporary measure to speed recovery from the great hurricane of 1900. Other cities in Texas and across the nation soon followed; by 1920, about 500 municipalities had adopted the plan in which elected representatives serve as heads of city departments and, collectively, as a policy-making body.

Beginning with Galveston and Houston and Des Moines, Iowa, Bradley Robert Rice presents detailed case studies of the earliest commission cities and shows how the plan was developed and modified to suit each community's needs. He goes on to chronicle the adoption of the commission plan by other cities across the country that strove for "businesslike efficiency" as a reaction against corruption and machine politics in urban government. Most commission charters included a wide-ranging package of municipal reforms, such as the short ballot, at-large representation, nonpartisanship, civil service, and direct legislation. Yet Rice shows that the commission plan generally offered little in the way of social reform to accompany its reorganization of municipal government.

Applying a model of innovation diffusion, the author analyzes how and why the new form of city government spread across Progressive Era America. He also thoroughly explores the relationship between the commission plan and other Progressive Era reforms and reports on the reasons for its decline from both a social and a practical perspective.

Progressive Cities is described by Professor Bruce M. Stave, editor of the *Journal of Urban History*, as "a sound piece of work which should make a useful and worthwhile contribution to the existing scholarship on urban reform and should appeal to an audience which cuts across disciplines: history, political science, urban studies and urban planning."

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