

A REVIEW OF UNIGOV
FOR
THE UNIGOV ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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A REVIEW OF UNIGOV

In 1970, a new governing structure, known colloquially as Unigov, merged the governments of the city of Indianapolis and Marion County. A product of a unique political moment, political actors, and a fractured opposition, Unigov has been viewed both as a model for city-county consolidation in the late twentieth century and as tepid reform motivated by political calculation rather than public interest. Unigov has been assessed as an agent for growth, helping the region emerge through global economic restructuring and revitalizing a dying urban core in the wake of suburbanization. Criticism, initially sourced from the political margins and racial minorities fearing a dilution of voting power, has waned in the years since consolidation. In the twenty-first century, a move towards further consolidation of city and county services has been undertaken.

Prior to the Unigov consolidation, Indianapolis experienced a “fractionalized governmental structure [which] contributed to the widely held perception by the citizenry that local government was inefficient, ineffective, and unresponsive” (Stephens and Wikstrom, p. 81). By 1960, there were more than sixty government units operating within the boundaries of Marion County, including: county government, twenty-two municipalities (including the city of Indianapolis), eleven school districts, nine townships, and numerous special district taxing units. This led to duplication of services, under-representation of taxpayers, and a bureaucratic maze of mingling oversight bodies.

In the early 1960s, Mayor John J. Barton and Democratic County Chairman James W. Beatty attempted to pass a series of bills aimed at consolidating powers in the city executive.¹ “Beatty’s goal was to strengthen the mayor’s office by increasing administrators’ loyalty and dependence on the mayor” (Pierce, p. 110). The bulk of the legislation failed to garner support and was termed a “power grab” by the local media. Despite the failure of Barton’s maneuvering and a political divide in state government, further attempts at consolidation found bipartisan support. “House Republicans in 1967 had been extremely aggressive in moving towards consolidating some government functions in Marion County. With complete cooperation from the Senate Democrat majority, several of the goals that would pave the way for Uni-Gov were achieved” (Borst, p. 84)

As with many urban centers in the mid-twentieth century, Indianapolis experienced an exodus of residents from the inner-city towards the surrounding suburbs. Migrating populations and the accompanying tax revenues shifted service delivery away from the urban core and left the inner city with dwindling finances. “[County government] was unable to meet the service needs of the rapidly growing suburban population in the immediate post-World War II period,” and thus a number of city services were extended beyond the municipal boundaries including: sewer and sanitation districts, library facilities, planning and zoning commissions, maintenance of government facilities (in the form of the joint City-County building), transit authority, as well as a number of county-wide corporations to manage parks and recreation, the airport, and hospitals (Stephens and Wikstrom, p. 81). While numerous non-political services were consolidated with

¹ Attempts were made as early as 1925 to consolidate municipal service delivery with those of the county. Legislative committees in the state government were formed in 1935, 1951, 1961, and 1963 to study the feasibility of metropolitan government in central Indiana (Indianapolis Star, February 15, 1969).

little opposition, a broader governmental restructuring required a unique political environment for success.

The 1967 municipal elections saw Republican candidates sweep into power, gaining the Indianapolis mayoralty and majorities on both the city and county councils. Richard G. Lugar, a young former member of the Indianapolis school board and a Rhodes Scholar, won the mayoral election. Backed by the new Marion County Republican chairmen, L. Keith Bulen, Lugar ran county-wide in the election, garnering support and contributions from the suburban Republican establishment. Campaign activity “worked to the subsequent advantage of the unifying legislation,” and as Lugar stated, “Without the strong ties that came out of the primary and general elections, Unigov would not have had nearly so good a chance of success” (Daniels, p. 21). Upon assuming office in 1968, Lugar quickly set into motion the political machinations required to reorganize local government, and his leadership would be remembered as instrumental in the success of the consolidation efforts.

It was in early 1968 when the new mayor secretly assembled a group of civic and political leaders to begin discussing the prospects of metropolitan government. The meetings were held in the home of insurance magnate John Burkhart and included the heads of the city and county councils, Thomas Hasbrook and Beurt SerVass respectively, attorneys Lewis Bose and Charles L. Whistler, state politician and then United States Senate candidate William D. Ruckleshaus, and chief executive of the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, Carl Dortch. Drafting of the actual legislation fell to the hands of Bose, Whistler, and a team of specialized attorneys working quickly and privately to formulate the new governmental structure.

Unigov was designed to consolidate the city and county governments under a strong mayor-council system. “All services were brought under the supervision of a single executive, and the duties of fifty-eight city and county agencies were reassigned to six cabinet-level departments” (Daniels, p. 1). The legislative functions of the city and county councils were combined to create the City-County Council with twenty-five district seats and four councillors elected at-large. “The proponents avoided all chance of galvanizing a strong opposing force by avoiding highly emotional issues” (Daniels, p. 130). To that end the decision was made to exclude discussions of consolidating school districts, public safety agencies including police and fire departments, and a framework was created by which existing municipalities maintained varying levels of autonomy.

In a political calculation, Lugar announced his plans to attempt metropolitan government in October of 1968, just prior to the state-wide elections that November. Lugar campaigned heavily across the state for Republican candidates in the hopes of garnering support in the state legislature when the Unigov bill was brought for a vote. The election saw Republicans obtain super majorities in both houses of the state legislature (including taking all seats elected out of Marion County) as well as the governor’s office. Lugar announced the formation of a Governmental Restructure Task Force to explore possible ways of improving local government. As most of the political maneuvering and drafting had already begun in secret, “the Governmental Restructure Task Force... was conceived primarily as an object for public display, as the visible evidence that metropolitan government was being analyzed by members of the community, and not simply rammed through by elected officials” (Daniels, p. 36). The hope was to “minimize the general impression that Unigov was exclusively the pet plan of a power-hungry

incumbent... [and] it was important that the impulse and support for the reform appear to come from the private sector” (Daniels, p. 69).

As the details of Unigov became public, debate on the merits of the plan took center stage. “The reorganization plan was widely publicized and it quickly drew the support of a number of Democratic leaders, several African-American political leaders, the League of Women Voters, and a score of other community leaders” (Stephens and Wikstrom, p. 82). The Mayor’s Task Force, a carefully chosen group of business and political leaders, was successful in presenting the metropolitan concept to the populace. In successful cases of metropolitan consolidation, “business leaders have led or given strong support to unification movements... while metropolitan dailies and the mass media also back reform efforts, while their local counterparts stood in opposition” (Daniels, p. 5-6). Unigov followed this typical pattern, with the support being voiced from the large media outlets (their initial opposition was appeased through changes to the bill and lobbying by the mayor and task force members) and opposition coming from the smaller papers in the suburban communities.

A fractured opposition was never able to mount a strong challenge to the political organization Lugar and his colleagues had assembled months earlier. “Most of the opposition to the bill was from those people who might be losing some of their legal responsibilities” including a number of county officials whose positions were to be eliminated or reduced in the consolidated government (Borst, p. 89). Democrats saw the addition of suburban voters to the city rolls as a coup to perpetuate Republican control of county government. As was noted in the local press, “The plan has been criticized by Democrats as assuring Republican control, in most elections, since outside townships predominantly are GOP” (Indianapolis Star, January 20, 1969). Democratic Party Chairman, James W. Beatty, was quoted in the Indianapolis Star as having “described the bill as a ‘political tool’ to help Republicans win elections by allowing people in outside townships to vote for mayor” (Indianapolis Star, January 22, 1969).

Attempts to circulate anti-Unigov petitions never garnered strong enough support to counter the pro-Consolidation machine. “Labor leaders stood against Unigov and criticized the absence from the plan of police, fire departments, and schools. But when pressed to provide evidence of their members’ feelings concerning reorganization, leaders were forced to admit they had none” (Pierce, p. 116). Similarly, the concerns of the politically powerful volunteer fire departments, active in many of the suburban townships, were muted by the exclusion of fire services from the final consolidation plan.

The group viewed as having the most to lose politically from a city-county merger was the African-American population. White flight to the suburbs and a growing African-American population in the inner city led some to “project that blacks would make up between 30 and 40 percent of the population by 1970. Under Unigov, the incorporation of the mostly white suburbs dropped the African-American presence in the city to 18 percent, and black political strength reverted to levels reached in 1945” (Pierce, p. 120-121). Despite demographic growth and increased political clout, the inner-city black community retained “almost no indigenous leadership and a history of low political participation” (Daniels, p. 18). The Lugar organization, anticipating a challenge based on minority voting trends, sought to counter any assertion that the bill was designed to diminish black voting power by flooding local government with white

suburban voters. African-American civic and business leaders were invited to participate in the Mayor's Task Force and a number of prominent black figures came out in support of the bill.

The group most likely to have derailed the Unigov legislation was a group of far-right, conservative politicians, led by state senator Joan Gubbins, who saw the consolidation as another form of government overreach. Within the Republican party, efforts were taken which "probably stifled much criticism" and "at least some explicit action was taken to limit disloyalty" (Daniels, p. 86). Despite these efforts a vocal opposition developed among those who thought consolidation should be put to a vote. "The idea of a referendum figured in the criticism of nearly all opponents of Unigov, but found its most persistent and vocal champions in the leaders of suburban right-wing resistance" (Daniels, p. 94). To Lugar and his political allies, a referendum was undesirable and fortunately, not required to reach their stated goals. In Indiana, "local governments are creatures of the state and may be created, enlarged, contracted, merged, or destroyed by the legislature without regard to the preferences of the local residents" (Blomquist, p. 1352). It was generally accepted that Unigov would not survive a public vote and Lugar challenged calls by those in favor of a referendum by citing the costs of such an endeavor and the nature of representative democracy.

Lugar attempted to show public support for the bill by releasing the results of a phone survey conducted by a local civic organization favorable to the legislation. "Examination of the poll... suggests that the survey was taken not impartially, but on behalf of the proponents, and that it was intended or even adjusted to show community endorsement of unification" (Daniels, p. 113). Eighty percent of survey respondents were eliminated from the reported results for not being informed enough about the legislation. The reported results were thusly skewed towards support for Unigov. "As a substitute for a referendum on [Unigov] it was utterly invalid and unacceptable" (Daniels, p. 113).

The disjointed opposition failed to counter the effective organization assembled by Lugar and his colleagues. Having announced his plans for government reform in October 1968, the Unigov bill was introduced in the Indiana legislature the next year and was signed into law by the governor on March 13. The leadership of Lugar cannot be overstated in passing the consolidation legislation with unprecedented haste. Despite initial opposition, following implementation the bill received little notice from the public and politicians alike. Lugar went on to win the county-wide mayoralty by a wide margin and eventually secured a United States Senate seat.

In the ensuing years, the Unigov structure was implemented with little resistance and continues to be a rallying point for local government reform in central Indiana. Despite the initial claims of simplifying government, "the delivery of public services in Indianapolis-Marion County is significantly more complicated than the Unigov structure would suggest" (Stephens and Wikstrom, p. 84). More than fifty governmental and taxing units continue to administer to county residents.

Despite failing to simplify government, reorganization has been seen as instrumental in revitalizing the city's core. "Unigov has been credited with attracting to Indianapolis, through various public-private partnerships, a large amount of business investment, which has spurred economic growth and job opportunities" (Stephens and Wikstrom, p. 86). Such partnerships were

made possible by the implementation of the county-wide executive. Strong mayoral figures have been successful in setting policy and defining the vision of the city.

Further consolidations of city services have been completed in the years following the passage of Unigov. Most notably, since the turn of the twenty-first century, county-wide police service has been implemented through the creation of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department. Fire service has been expanded to a number of townships and the entire county is protected by professional fire services, eliminating the need for volunteer services. The current mayoral administration has set an agenda priority, termed Unigov 2.0, which seeks to expand on the metropolitan model.

Some early criticisms of the bill have been shown to be founded. “It is clear that the establishment of Unigov diminished the political and economic interests of the African-American community” (Stephens and Wikstrom, p. 86). While the district-level councillor seats have helped to proportionally increase African-American representation in city and county government, no African-American has held the executive office in the history of the city and county. Suggestions that “Unigov was primarily a political act intended to perpetuate Republican control of Indianapolis city government” were embodied by voting trends through the twentieth century (Schreiber, p. 23). Republican candidates have dominated the office of mayor with only one Democratic exception since the passage of the bill. This trend appears to be slowing in the twentieth-first century as Democratic voters have succeeded in securing a number of county-wide offices.

Metropolitan government in Indianapolis-Marion County, through the Unigov legislation, helped guide central Indiana through the twentieth century. While promised as a means of simplifying local government and bringing services closer to the people, Unigov created a system equally as confusing as the previous. The new structure was successful in solidifying executive functions within a single, county-wide office as well as perpetuating partisan political control of county government. Further consolidations in the twenty-first century have attempted to continue the efforts towards metropolitanization, though such attempts have been limited by Unigov’s provisions to halt control at the county border while the metropolitan area has expanded beyond these boundaries. In the future, further legislative reform will need to be undertaken to complete the goal of metropolitan government.

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