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# **Power, Participation, and Protest in Flint, Michigan: Unpacking the Policy Paradox of Municipal Takeovers by Ashley E. Nickels**

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*Power, Participation, and Protest in Flint, Michigan: Unpacking the Policy Paradox of Municipal Takeovers*, by Ashley E. Nickels, is a timely examination of municipal takeover in the United States, primarily focused on Flint, Michigan. Municipal takeover is the term used by the author to describe Michigan's 'emergency manager law,' which enables Michigan to appoint an emergency manager to run a city such as Flint, essentially suspending the governing authority of local elected officials. This work is timely because of the attention Flint, Michigan has received for its toxic water quality—a problem which persists—due in large part to decisions made by the state-appointed emergency manager. It is also timely as the nation confronts (again) ongoing systemic racism, which also played a role in the water crisis in Flint. The book is important for bringing light to these issues, and for contextualizing municipal takeover and the situation in Flint within larger debates in the field of public administration, related to the powers of states versus local governments, technical rationality versus politics in public management, efficiency versus democracy in policy making, and development versus social equity in local planning.

The book is organized to give both a historical and contemporary view of municipal takeovers in Flint, addressing the main question: How does the implementation of municipal takeover reshape local democracy? The book addresses the research question through a policy-centered single-case research design, with Flint as the case. Data were gathered through documentary evidence, observation and field research, and formal and informal interviews with dozens of people associated with groups such as government officials, citizens, activists, philanthropic funders, and nonprofit leaders. In addressing the research question, Nickels shows the inherently political nature of municipal takeovers, and their political implications. This is the 'policy paradox' noted in the book's title. Building on Deborah Stone's concept, the book shows how municipal takeovers do not avoid politics; rather, they create new politics. These new politics lead to shifts in who gains or loses power in the local community (and state) and has implications in subverting local democracy.

One set of institutions of particular interest to me that Nickels focuses on are philanthropic foundations. She shows in her findings how philanthropic foundations and other elites appear

to gain additional power from municipal takeover. Due to its history in car manufacturing, Flint is home to several large philanthropic funders—the Charles Stuart (C. S.) Mott Foundation being the most prominent. As described by several of those interviewed and quoted in the book, through its funding, the C. S. Mott Foundation “has significant influence in determining what does and does not happen in the city” (p. 83), shaping local power structures and development patterns. The book describes how organizations such as the C. S. Mott Foundation, as well as the local Chamber of Commerce, and other local elites, were able to shape the emergency manager’s agenda (p. 161), focusing on development, efficiency, fiscal stability, and managerial solutions to problems, as opposed to addressing the structural issues that created these problems in the first place. Nickels shows how these elite groups ultimately benefited under municipal takeover at the expense of local citizens’ democratic engagement (and physical health).

One of these structural issues is systemic racism. Nickels notes that municipal takeovers have primarily been applied to majority-black cities by a mainly white state government, highlighting how racism plays a role in the power the state exerted over local governments through the emergency manager law. In the case of Flint, “explicit and implicit racism created community divisions along racial lines” (p. 70) that continues today and was brought up in most of Nickels’ interviews. The application of the emergency manager law meant that mostly people of color lost their right to elect representatives with local power to make local decisions. As Nickels notes, citizens “lost their voice involving civic matters” (p. 150), “disproportionally impacting communities of color” (p. 152).

Often, research in our field, dealing with public administration issues such as municipal takeovers, are approached as seemingly apolitical technical problems. Nickels avoids this, doing an excellent job of revealing the political nature of municipal takeovers and how problems posed as technical or managerial are political. She also engages the voices and perspectives of not just public administrators, but also the citizens and activists impacted. This work is a model for other public administration scholars who must do better to consider the context and paradoxes of problems caused by political, social, economic, racist, or other structures. Others agree, as this book has already received awards from the American Society for Public Administration’s Section on Democracy and Social Justice and the American Political Science Association.

Local and state government elected officials, activists, and students would benefit from reading this book. It would be an excellent addition to any urban or local government, planning, or policy, or philanthropy course. It would also pair well with other books addressing issues of systemic racism and governance, such as *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, by Richard Rothstein, which provides an important history of how racism has and continues to shape our cities and is at the base of many of the fiscal and political challenges faced by cities such as Flint.

### **Disclosure Statement**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

### **Author Biography**

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