

A progressive urban policy agenda

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American cities typically receive short shrift from political parties and candidates. This is due partly to an underlying anti-urban strain in American culture, partly to the under-representation of cities in federal, state, and county governments, and partly to the large numbers of urban dwellers who cannot or do not participate in the political system. As progressives, we aim to bring cities into the mainstream of American political life because:

- Cities are vital to our environmental, cultural, and economic well-being;
- Cities provide services and opportunities for our neediest population groups;
- Cities offer public space for democratic dialogue, education, and interaction;
- Cities are home to a great many progressive voters whose livelihoods and social and cultural values are under attack.

The environmental value of cities

Urban residents, on average, live far more sustainably than suburban and exurban dwellers. They use fewer fossil fuels, because they drive less and walk or take public transportation more, and because they tend to live in smaller apartments that are more efficient to heat than single-family houses. They use less water, because they are far less likely to keep a lawn or wash cars and driveways. They occupy much less land area per capita, which leaves more land elsewhere for agriculture, forests, wetlands, and open spaces. As the Earth's human population increases, densely occupied cities are the only viable solution to housing it. [[See Green Manhattan, by David Owen, first published in The New Yorker, October 18, 2004.](#) Available at www.greenbelt.org/resources/newswire. Choose Vol. 3, Issue 11; then choose Green Manhattan.]

The inequitable treatment of cities

How does our society reward urban dwellers for their more sustainable lifestyle choices? With higher taxes, poorly-funded schools and public transportation systems, unequal political representation, and unhealthy air quality.

Most American cities are shrinking in population while their metropolitan areas increase in size. This means that residents of the inner core are paying taxes to subsidize the building of roads and pipe lines in outlying areas for people who are moving out of the city, where they will live less sustainably and will abdicate their role in promoting the public good that cities serve. The remaining urban residents end up paying more for schools and to subsidize the tax-exempt public institutions that suburbanites enjoy but no longer pay for.

In the large and thriving American cities, a different inequity holds sway. Since housing, goods and services are more costly in these cities than elsewhere in the nation, residents

generally need higher incomes to maintain a basic standard of living. They therefore pay much higher federal and state income taxes than most Americans, even though they receive less for their money. Republican tax proposals would make this situation worse by eliminating deductions for state and local taxes. The Alternative Minimum Tax also increasingly affects urban families with high housing costs and high local taxes, whereas a family with similar income in an environmentally disastrous McMansion in car-intensive exurbia would not pay the AMT.

Progressive policies to promote the sustainable American city

Tax policy

- Tax equity for urban dwellers.
 - *Federal and State tax codes should include cost-of-living adjustments in setting basic deductions and/or tax rates.
 - *The Alternative Minimum Tax should also take regional cost-of-living into account.
 - *Progressives must fight any effort to eliminate deductions for state and local taxes.
- Tax land to promote density
 - *Metropolitan areas should be encouraged to adopt [two-tier property taxation](#), which places higher taxes on land than on buildings. This system is being used in some locales to discourage investors from keeping urban lots vacant or allowing urban buildings to deteriorate, and it dramatically reduces the tax "penalties" (higher assessments) that accrue to homeowners who improve their homes.
- User fees for private vehicles should replace user fees for public transportation.
 - *Examples include gas taxes and parking fees dedicated to financing public transportation, auto registration fees that are tied to fuel efficiency, and the inclusion of automobiles in the property tax assessment.
- Viable cities must have viable school systems.
 - *Education spending must be equalized throughout metropolitan regions without adding to the tax burden of urban residents. ([A study in 2000 by the Council of the Great City Schools](#) found that per-pupil expenditures within NYC were about 2/3 as high as per-pupil expenditures in the four surrounding counties.) Equity requires a shift from reliance on local property taxes to sharing the burden within metropolitan regions, states, and the nation as a whole and a commitment to adequate financing of schools for high achievement (see [the Council of the Great City Schools web site](#) for a discussion of the Adequate Financing issue).

Political equity

- Move early primaries for federal elections to urban states. The current political primary schedule gives undue precedence to rural states like NH and IA in choosing candidates.
- Abolish the Electoral College. Each state gets two extra votes in addition to votes allocated by population, which gives residents of states with small populations an outsized voice in choosing the President.

- Demand a Senator for the District of Columbia. The Senate, like the Electoral College, gives rural Americans disproportionate representation; this would go part way toward redressing the imbalance.
- Demand equal voting rights for all citizens. Urban neighborhoods still suffer from inadequate voting facilities and other disparities.

Environmental equity

- Support brownfield redevelopment initiatives that clean up and redevelop urban areas without displacing residents ([Urban Habitat has a comprehensive position paper on this issue](#)).
- Promote low-emissions vehicles through regulation, incentives, zoning and tax policies, to reduce urban smog and the health effects associated with it.
- Work for changes in local zoning laws to allow and encourage green building design, including green roofs, and the use of alternatives to blacktop paving (such as permeable paving and lighter-colored surfaces). Such measures help to reduce the "heat island" effect that makes cities several degrees hotter than their surroundings.
- Good transportation policy is also good urban and environmental policy. Governments at the local, state, and national level need to shift transportation resources into accessible and reliable public transportation, amenities for pedestrians and bicyclists, smart growth zoning that locates new developments at transportation hubs, and high-speed rail links between metropolitan areas.