
Wendy Greuel: Nice

Tomorrow, Los Angeles voters go to the polls to elect a new Mayor. (At least a few of them, anyway: current estimates predict only 25% turnout, about which more later). In September, New Yorkers will do the same. And depending upon the way things turn out, political and cultural reporters could have a field day.

If Christine Quinn and Wendy Greuel win in their respective cities, we will have female mayors of both cities for the first time. And the press will have a lot of fun with it, because the two women seem to epitomize their cities' personalities. Quinn is famously nasty and vicious, character traits she is now trying to ameliorate at least publicly. Much less famously, but just as truly, Greuel is quite nice: I've known her for nearly 20 years, and you can't deny that she is personally a very nice person.

And if you think about it, that is true more broadly. If Anthony Weiner runs for NYC mayor, we'll get another jerk trying to get to Gracie Mansion. Greuel's rival, Eric Garcetti, whom I've also known for a long time, is likewise very friendly and nice. Even the campaign by realistic standards has been pretty tame.

If you think about New York mayors, they are hardly aiming for Mr. Congeniality: Ed Koch, Rudy Giuliani, and even Michael Bloomberg aren't necessarily the sort of person you'd want to hang out with. But on the left coast, Tom Bradley almost epitomized mellow moderation; Antonio Villaraigosa is probably too personally charming for his own good; Jim Hahn might not have been the sharpest pencil in the cup but is a genuiunely nice guy; even Richard Riordan is pretty friendly and cordial. David Dinkins, of course, was notably polite and courtly — and seemed out of his element because of it.

Why is this? Is it just New York Nasty and Los Angeles Nice? Maybe, but perhaps this is something bigger going on here.


Christine Quinn: Not-so-nice

New York mayors wield vast power. They control huge departments, manage an enormous budget, and dominate the city politically. New York City comprises five different county governments and thus contains the counties' power. The New York mayor's problem is keeping control over the whole thing, not to mention corralling a

notoriously-fractious urban political party (and sometimes more than that if they have the Liberal or Conservative endorsement). The Mayor also plays a major role in appointing the Board of Education. Hizzoner has to knock heads to get anything done.

In Los Angeles, on the other hand, the Mayor is relatively weak. Los Angeles city government is dominated by civil service personnel, whom the Mayor can't just order around. Before 1992, this was even the case with the Police Department: I distinctly remember my east coast friends saying to me, "If Tom Bradley hates Daryl Gates so much, why doesn't he just fire him?" Answer: he couldn't. And he still can't: the police chief has a five-year term. Even with other departments, the Mayor can't appoint dozens and dozens of officials: instead, he appoints usually five-member volunteer commissioners, who, because they are volunteers, are usually dominated by professional civil service staff. That is not a recipe for strong executive leadership.

Eric Garcetti: Nice

The Los Angeles mayor has no control over the school district or the Board of Education. The Los Angeles City Council only has 15 members, making each councilmember the monarch of his or her district; in New York, there are so many councilmembers that they comparatively little power, although not negligible. The City of Los Angeles has no control over the vastly bigger County of Los Angeles. The Mayor of New York can call up the Brooklyn boroough President to berate and threaten him: in Los Angeles, the only way the City get the County to what it wants is through a lawsuit.

Or persuasion. The Mayor of Los Angeles has to persuade all these other constituencies to do what he or she wants: they can't bully or force them. Los Angeles elections are nonpartisan, and so the Mayor doesn't even have a political organization to use. The only way a Los Angeles Mayor will be effective will be through the patient and often-maddening business of assembling political coalitions, community groups, public sector unions, developers, etc. A screamer in Los Angeles City Hall is someone who literally has no chance of success.

No wonder, then, that voters seem so uninterested: it's not abundantly clear what precisely the Mayor is supposed to do, a condition that the early 20th century Progressives who framed the Los Angeles charter wanted.

The political scientist Kenneth Waltz, who died last week at the age of 88, made a similar point about the personalities of Presidents and Prime Ministers. A President has to try to use the power of the bully pulpit and his dominance over the executive branch to get things done. A Prime Minister, on the other hand, has to use persuasion to maintain his party coalition — if he doesn't, he'll get kicked out by his own caucus. I think that that works here.

Whether Garcetti or Greuel wins tomorrow, the next Los Angeles mayor will be a pretty nice person. Whether Quinn or Weiner or someone else wins in New York, the next New York mayor will probably be something of a jerk. But the political structure will have as much to do with this as any tired cultural stereotypes.

And what does this have to with environmental law? Well, aside from the important functions that cities play in environmental policy, it also points to the way in which structural forces can help determine the behavior of political and bureaucratic actors. You can look at ideology, or interest groups, or history, or a variety of other things, but one of the best ways to try to predict and explain behavior is to examine structural incentives. As Terry Moe wrote in a classic essay more than 20 years ago, bureaucratic structure not only represents a fierce battleground for interests, but once it is in place, it conditions what those bureaucracies do. City Hall needs that analysis as much as OSHA or the EPA.

Fuggetaboutit!