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**ROBERT WAGNER AND
THE RISE OF NEW YORK
CITY'S PLEBISCITARY
MAYORALTY**

The Tamer of the Tammany Tiger

Richard M. Flanagan





**Robert Wagner and the Rise of New York City's
Plebiscitary Mayoralty**

Also by Richard M. Flanagan

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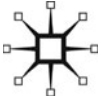
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▶ **Robert Wagner and the
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Plebiscitary Mayoralty:
The Tamer of the
Tammany Tiger**

Richard M. Flanagan

*Associate Professor, City College of New York,
College of Staten Island, USA*

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ROBERT WAGNER AND THE RISE OF NEW YORK CITY'S PLEBISCITARY MAYORALTY
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To my wife, Melissa, and son, Jackson, my two favorite New Yorkers by way of St. Louis and Zhengzhou, respectively.

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1

Introduction: Robert F. Wagner, the Forgotten Mayor

Abstract: Both the public and academics have largely forgotten three-term mayor Robert F. Wagner (1954–1965). However, his administration institutionalized New York liberalism and created the modern political system. Robert Wagner was one of the most influential mayors in the city's history.

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New York City mayor Robert F. Wagner (1954–1965) governed during a period of momentous change in local politics. In this era—too often viewed as a mere prelude to the racial unrest of the John Lindsay years (1966–1973) and the fiscal crisis of the 1970s—important policy changes took place in the fields of housing, education, race and labor relations, and in the structures of local governance. Incongruously, however, despite all of the changes in politics and public policy in play in the 1950s and 1960s, Wagner himself is remembered as a “broker” politician who passively mediated the pressing demands of the city’s constellation of interest groups as if his decisions meant little in how the policies of the era were crafted.¹ Interpretations of the Wagner administration are inevitably tied closely to his grayish leadership style and owlsh public persona. The myopic focus on the man misses the institutional structures that were reconstituted in the three Wagner administrations, the role that the mayor’s own strategic decision-making played in forging the political changes of the era, and the long-term consequences of Mayor Wagner’s choices for future generations of city politicians and citizens.

Wagner central legacy was the establishment of a “plebiscitary mayoralty,” setting in place institutional changes that would channel the behaviors and choices of his successors. The Wagner years were an important path-dependent moment in New York City politics that realigned the relationship between the mayoralty and the party system, interest groups and citizens, and reshaped the governing capacity of the office—for both good and bad—in subsequent decades.² Behind the façade of the unassuming and beleaguered chief executive, a “hidden-hand” mayor sought to mold the tumultuous forces of political change to his own political advantage.³ In addition, Wagner is properly understood as having completed and institutionalized the New Deal project in New York pioneered by Mayor La Guardia (1934–1945). Wagner expanded the programmatic reach of municipal government, codified the construction of the foundations of the municipal labor movement, and permanently recalibrated the balance of power between the office of the mayor, the city bureaucracy, and the political party system in New York City.

The work proceeds as follows. First, it focuses on the meaning and applicability of the concept of plebiscitary governance in the US urban context. Second, the work considers and evaluates the major policy accomplishments of the Wagner years, arguing that they amounted to the programmatic completion of the “Little New Deal” in New York City, the promise of which had only been partially fulfilled by Mayor La Guardia

in the 1930s. After covering this programmatic ground, the work moves to consider how governmental and political structures changed in the Wagner years to greatly strengthen the mayoralty. New policies birthed new governing relationships that made the mayor much more important relative to other actors such as party chiefs in city affairs. Each victory for Wagner's Little New Deal strengthened the power of city hall and the bureaucracy under the mayor's command. These structural realignments were expressed in the dramatic events leading up to the watershed election of 1961, when, in an epic showdown with Carmine De Sapio, the boss of Tammany Hall, Wagner won the Democratic nomination for mayor without the support of the borough party machines. The mayor beat back the party bosses. This acrimonious break between the city's two leading political powerhouses, Wagner and De Sapio, marked the moment that the mayor publically renounced borough-based party leadership. In its place, Wagner developed a not entirely satisfying reform-style politics marked by programmatic initiatives and patronage politics managed and allocated through ad hoc mayoral coalitions rather than the borough machines and political clubhouses of the past. Outmoded institutions and practices did persist, however, servicing lower offices, or as vessels for the ambitions of mayoral aspirants seeking an early leg up in the candidate-centered politics of the post-Wagner era. But the turn toward the borough-centered organizations for support often visited upon them more trouble than the alliances were worth.

The final section of this work turns attention to the contemporary characteristics of New York City's political system that were shaped by the events and decisions of the Wagner years. In this we see the long shadow of Wagner on the seven men who have served since he did in an office that is often called "the second hardest job in the world."⁴

Notes

- 1 Wagner is characterized as a "broker" mayor in Douglas Yates' book, *The Ungovernable City: The Politics of Urban Problems and Policy Making* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977). It is an unflattering characterization, in that brokers lack the political power to act decisively. The more heroic ideal type in Yates' scheme is the *entrepreneurial mayor* who marshals resources to leave a positive mark on city politics. As heroic but politically weak is the *crusader mayor* whose rhetorical, reformist flourishes fall short of mark; less heroic but equally strong

is the *boss-mayor*, whose resources are put to use to serve narrow personal or political interests. In Sayre and Kaufman's review and ranking of New York City mayors, Wagner is classified as a middling mayor with few dramatic successes or failures. Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, *Governing New York* (New York: Russell Sage, 1960). Wagner's treatment in the most widely read book about New York politics, Robert Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Random House, 1975), is not flattering at all. Wagner plays the role of doormat to Robert Moses' strongman. In the past ten or so years, there have been major biographies and reassessments of the other long-serving mayors since the creation of the modern City of New York in 1898, including Fiorello La Guardia, [H. Paul Jeffers, *The Napoleon of New York: Mayor Fiorello La Guardia* (New York: Wiley, 2002)]; John Lindsay [Vincent Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2002)]; Joseph Viteritti, editor, *Summer in the City: John Lindsay, New York, and the American Dream* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014)]; Ed Koch, [Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2012)]; David Dinkins [Chris McNickle, *The Power of the Mayor: David Dinkins, 1990–1993* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012)]; Rudy Giuliani, [Fred Siegel and Harry Siegel, *The Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York and the Genius of American Life* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006)] and Michael Bloomberg [Julian Brash, *Bloomberg's New York: Class and Governance in the Luxury City* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2012)]. La Guardia and Lindsay stand out as mayors who have been analyzed and evaluated on many occasions. Mayor Wagner is the only reelected mayor since consolidation who has not received any scholarly or popular press attention to date.

- 2 On the concept of "path dependence" in political science, see: Paul Pierson, "Path Dependence, Increasing Returns, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 94:2, (June 2000), 251–267. On the application of the path-dependence concept in political science, see: Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocpol, *State and Party in America's New Deal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
- 3 I borrow the term "hidden-hand" from Fred Greenstein's revisionist description of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency in *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader*, 2nd Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1984). Many historians dismissed Eisenhower as an ineffective, passive president. Greenstein demonstrated that Eisenhower was an engaged, behind the scenes leader who manipulated his public image as a doddering, bureaucratic general to his advantage. There are parallels to Wagner's governing style here. Much of Wagner's hesitancy as a leader was tied to the fact that he had great respect for tradition and the wisdom of his predecessors, in the Burkean sense that cautiousness is a requirement of prudential judgment. Wagner himself

reported that his years of service during World War II as a military lawyer influenced his thinking about politics. “It helped me understand some of our public laws. In other words, you read through that court marshal manual, you say, ‘What the heck, who ever thought of this?’ Then you’d find out, it worked pretty well. Some people had given real thought to matters in ordinances and directives used by the military over many years, and a respect for the past, a knowledge that you need to revise it every now and then, but respect the past, and I think that helped me later in life to understand why departments were conceived that way – it wasn’t haphazard. There was some intelligence put into it, some reason.” *Reminiscences of Robert F. Wagner*, Oral History, 1979, Columbia University Library, 146.

- 4 The most difficult job refers to the US presidency. The invention of this meme is often attributed to Mayor John Lindsay. After a difficult first term, Lindsay’s campaign strategy in 1969 was to concede that he made mistakes, offering up as an apology that he had “the second hardest job in America.” But in fact, journalists and mayors had floated this notion of the second-hardest job before. Barry Popik found examples from the 1940s. Perhaps the most colorful expression of the idea was made by journalist S.J. Wolfe about the burden of one-term mayor William O’Dwyer: “Being Mayor of New York is said to be ‘the second toughest job in the world,’ the only tougher one being that of the man in the White House. New York City is a corporation which spends a billion dollars a year, employs 193,983 men and women, and provides free education for more boys and girls than the entire population of Boston or St. Louis. All this calls for a great deal in the man who sits at the Mayor’s desk in City Hall. It also takes a great deal out of him, even in quiet times.” S.J. Wolfe, “O’Dwyer Tells Why Its Tough,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1948, SM14. Quoted in Barry Popik, “Entry from December 31, 2007: Second Toughest Job in America (NYC Mayor)” http://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/second_toughest_job_in_america_nyc_mayor. The seven mayors since Wagner are John Lindsay (1965–1973), Abraham Beame (1974–1977), Edward Koch (1978–1989), David Dinkins (1990–1993), Rudolph Giuliani (1994–2001), Michael Bloomberg (2002–2013) and Bill de Blasio (2014–).

2

The Concept of the “Plebiscitary Mayoralty”

Abstract: By bypassing the party organizations and strengthening the administrative power of the mayoralty in order to finish the New Deal project in New York, Mayor Robert Wagner established direct, programmatic connections with citizens and courted the government workers who supplied the services of the local welfare state. The literature about plebiscitary politics in the US context is reviewed with a focus on the presidency.

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The term "plebiscitary mayoralty," as it is used here, describes a direct, unmediated relationship between the mayor and citizens. The mayor speaks directly to voters through the mass media. He finds out what citizens want through public opinion polls and information gleaned from the city bureaucracy such as complaints and patterns of usage of city services. The word "plebiscite" means the direct vote of an entire citizenry on important public questions. Its Latin root comes from *pleb* (the common people) and *sciscere/scitum* (vote for a decree).

The construction of the plebiscitary mayoralty is Mayor Robert Wagner's most enduring contribution to New York City politics. This might at first appear to be an odd claim, since rule by plebiscite is most commonly understood as being established through an assertion of charismatic authority. On this personal level, the bond of affection between leader and electorate, Wagner was one of the least charismatic of New York City's mayors, many of whom had vibrant personalities. Fiorello La Guardia endeared himself to New Yorkers when he read newspaper comics to children over the radio during a newspaper strike; Mayor Jimmy Walker (1927–1932) was a pop song writing libertine who charmed many with his promotion of boxing, theater and even speak-easies during prohibition; Ed Koch cheered commuters as they walked over the Brooklyn Bridge during a strike by mass transit workers in 1978, and greeted all with the charmingly self-centered (to some) "How'm I doin'?"¹ John Lindsay's personal magnetism inspired a generation of citizen-activists to participate in the city's civic life. Such performances endeared these mayors to their constituents, and became a political resource in as much as the presentation of self influenced public opinion positively. Indeed, the folklore of the office is that it attracts tough, colorful politicians.

But Wagner's path-breaking role in the formation of the new form had much more to do with a change in structural relationships in the city rather than personal leadership style. In contrast to these personality-driven expressions discussed above, the linking of Wagner to the plebiscitary form focuses on the institutional and programmatic elements of the concept. While Wagner has been described as very funny in small groups, and owner of a caustic wit, his public presence was often that of a cautious plodder (this was, indeed, an image he resented). The essential element of Wagner's leadership was his renovation of the office of the mayor and the local administrative state as a vehicle to establish direct ties with citizens that turned on the provision of such services as

housing, health and education—services that were not often provided by US municipal governments. The forging of these ties to the mayor and local state weakened the affective links between citizens and traditional intermediary institutions like political clubs, party organizations and civic groups. Patronage and small favors, the lifeblood of the party machine, was replaced with the large-scale promises of mayoral politics—thousands of new housing units, better public schools, and lower taxes, to name a few of the programmatic promises of the new style of politics. The provision of a low-status municipal job for a supporter, or the fix of a parking ticket at the local police precinct, offended the rising middle class of the postwar era that exercise muscle through the reform political clubs, the newspapers and the universities.

Objections might be raised that the applicability of the plebiscitary concept might be limited in the context of New York City because direct referendums, or, for that matter, other forms of direct democracy are uncommon, largely constrained by the legal framework of the state constitution and the city charter. Yet another matter might be the charge of conceptual stretching of the notion of a plebiscite.² However, the term is used more expansively than the “dictionary sense” here, with a justification rooted in the literature about executive politics from political science in order to highlight the personal and programmatic connections modern New York mayors make with voters and citizens in the realm of governance and elections. The analysis here borrows from many studies in political science that have identified the plebiscitary pattern in the behavior and policies of the federal administrative state and the US presidency. Many analysts assert that plebiscitary characteristics mark the modernization of the US presidency and the welfare state, brought about by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the New Deal era. Seeking to advance his ambitious plans to reshape the economy and state/society relations, Roosevelt developed techniques and processes to overcome conservative adversaries in Congress and in state and local government. Roosevelt’s provision of aid to the unemployed, infrastructure development, and regulatory policies built a federal political machine.

FDR discarded the patronage-based politics of local, state and congressional parties, creating an independent political foundation for presidential politics that turned on the delivery of services to individuals, the promotion of the president’s legislative program, and the extension of administrative power of the executive branch into the lives of citizens. The presidency moved to the center of American politics, battering the