



Backpedaling in Birmingham

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Series: Progressive Mayors and Urban Social Movements

Despite the 2017 election of progressive, black mayors in major southern US cities, citizens who supported these candidates quickly learned that the new mayoral agendas looked very similar to the old ones. In Birmingham, Alabama, the election of Randall Woodfin resulted in city funds being utilized for business interests, such as helping a tech company lure talent to the city. When Woodfin backed a proposal for a \$2.5 million four-block bike trail while local potholes were being filled with red clay, residents who elected him on the basis of his agenda to improve local quality of life began to wonder if he was backpedaling in Birmingham.

In 2017, a supposedly new progressive wave of young African-American mayors swept into office in three American south-central cities: LaToya Cantrell in New Orleans, Louisiana, Chokwe Antar Lumumba in Jackson, Mississippi, and Randall Woodfin in Birmingham, Alabama. After the 1960s civil-rights movement (CRM), all three cities became majority African-American by the early 1970s. These cities faced declining populations as whites and some affluent blacks moved into suburbia, with retail and businesses following. These central cities became small seas of Democratic blue, a combination of African-American majorities with a minority of urban white (mostly) liberals in solidly red Republican states. Prior to the election of these new progressive mayors, these cities elected black as well as white Democrats who followed a local business blueprint of downtown redevelopment focused on growth-machine politics, viewing cities as theme parks for tourists and suburbanites to visit (Logan and Molotch 1987; Zukin 1996). However, these visions lacked attention on issues important to many residents: taxes, neighborhood crime, failing schools, and small-business revitalization. Today, a new type of liberal mayor is emerging with a progressive agenda in the wake of the Bernie Sanders 2016 presidential run. Not shying away from socialist policies on taxes, health care, education and prison reforms, as well as greater inclusion of lower-income black residents into the political process, the new progressives swept into office. However, once elected on these progressive agendas, they began to revert back to Democratic growth-machine politics. This included an emphasis on major downtown megaprojects benefiting black and white elites as opposed to the promised shift to neighborhood issues and incorporation of working-class blacks into city positions. The case of Randall Woodfin's mayoral election in Birmingham illustrates this process.

The civil-rights legacy

Although it's been over 50 years since international television audiences saw daily images of Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor and local leaders shooting water cannons and turning attack dogs on peaceful civil-rights movement protesters—including children

—challenging Jim Crow—era segregation laws, the city still retains an international image of racial intolerance that has hindered its development. Created in the 1870s as a planned steel town by British interests funded by New York and Pittsburgh robber barons, Birmingham’s local as well as behind-the-scenes investors banked on a segregated, non-union new city to produce cheaper steel than in the North thanks to their lobbying of the US Congress to enact the Pittsburgh Plus system, in which they charged consumers the same price for the lower-cost southern steel as if it was shipped from union factories. Starting in the 1950s and peaking by the 1970s, Birmingham’s blue-collar workers saw their jobs depart for cheaper international labor in Korea and later China, leaving major parts of the city’s northern and western neighborhoods abandoned brownfields. Following a model seen in northern US Rust Belt cities, Birmingham started to rebuild its economy around health care centered on the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) (Hemphill 1993; LaMonte 1995).

Why Birmingham fell behind rivals

In 1950, metro Birmingham’s and rival Atlanta’s populations were similar, at around 500,000. While Birmingham languished among the civil-rights violence, global deindustrialization and negative public images, Atlanta’s political machine began to incorporate some of the young, black CRM leaders of the 1960s, such as Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young, into the white machine. Using a mega-event strategy of professional sports stadiums, national political conventions, Super Bowls and the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, metro Atlanta’s population rose to around 5.7 million (Stone 1989). Since the 1970s, Birmingham’s metro population has remained stagnant at around 1 million, with the central-city population continually declining. Additionally, other American South cities like Charlotte and Nashville are eclipsing Birmingham for corporate headquarters and professional sports franchises, and are attracting millennial professionals.

Birmingham’s 2017 mayoral race

In the summer of 2017, twelve black candidates ran for Birmingham mayor in a non-partisan race, leading to a fall runoff election between the incumbent mayor, William Bell, and Randall Woodfin, a local lawyer and president of the Birmingham City School Board. They presented two distinct choices for the city. Current mayor William Bell represented the local version of growth-machine politics coming out of the 1960s civil-rights era, but with a straightforward agenda of downtown theme-park developments such as Uptown, a new entertainment district and hotel adjacent to the 1970s Birmingham–Jefferson County Civic Center (BJCC) complex of a sports arena, concert hall, and convention center. Another project on the formerly industrial West Side, the Crossplex Sports Complex, was built to attract NCAA¹ and high-school athletic events. Bell’s coalition comprised older black and white Democratic politicians and developers who benefited directly from these mega-projects. Voting for Bell was to confirm his agenda. Providing an alternative, Woodfin launched his campaign as a community-based progressive. Leading up to the July 2017 primary, Woodfin’s coalition attracted a large group of local neighborhood residents across both the primarily black West Side to the white South Side, as well as college-student volunteers. However, behind the scenes, outside money from Morehouse College alumni, a network of affluent black men who attended the historically black liberal arts college, poured into Woodfin’s campaign. These contributors² showed little to no interest in Woodfin’s people-first agenda.

In early August 2017, WBRC Fox 6 and the AARP³ hosted a televised debate with the top five polling candidates. In this debate, Woodfin said, “The number-one complaint I hear over and over is

¹ NCAA: National Collegiate Athletic Association.

² See, for example: <https://birminghamwatch.org/woodfin-bells-fundraising-allegations-false-misleading>.

³ AARP: organization formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons.

paving the streets.” In the August general election,⁴ Woodfin gained 40.8% of the vote to Bell’s 36.6%, forcing an October runoff election. However, both candidates would start fighting for an endorsement by Chris Woods, the third-place finisher, who gained 18% of the vote, while none of the other candidates earned over 1.5%. Woods, a former Auburn football star and son of Reverend Abraham Woods, a central figure in the 1960s civil-rights movement, joined the initial race over a disputed city building contract with Mayor Bell.

The initial suspicions about Woodfin’s progressivism began to surface in the runoff. Bell highlighted Woodfin’s lack of accomplishments with the Birmingham city schools, in which two high schools’ ACT averages were 13 (out of 36), as well as Woodfin’s defense of school-board employees with whom he had private business deals who later served prison sentences. Trying to gain Wood’s voters, Woodfin announced support for a new downtown stadium he initially opposed. Bell had significant political baggage as well, from scandals with the Birmingham Water Authority Board’s appointment process to his brother’s role in city politics with minority business programs, to global travel junkets. Woodfin eventually won Woods’ endorsement, shifting into the existing local black political regime that looked out for their own political and financial interest ahead of any working-class black neighborhood whose initial support got Woodfin the primary win. The local media framed the election in a harmful binary that flattened the complexity of the two candidates’ politics: a vote for Bell was to keep the status quo and a vote for Woodfin was for a new progressive start. Woodfin handily defeated Bell 59% to 41% in the runoff.⁵

The post-election switch

As soon as Woodfin took office in November 2017, his first priority was not neighborhood street paving improvements, but finalizing the once-opposed \$90 million deal to build a new downtown stadium and improvements to the BJCC. The sweetheart deal requires \$30 million in city funds, paid at \$3 million per year over 10 years.⁶ One tenant is UAB’s struggling lower-end Division 1 football program with attendance issues, and the other a new team in a start-up spring professional football league. Woodfin argued the increase in revenue from the redevelopment could be targeted to the city’s neighborhoods. Also, Woodfin planned to keep the 80-year-old Legion Field, UAB’s former home, as another football venue, pledging \$2.5 million for new artificial turf and stadium upgrades. To be fair, Woodfin began a program to place city information online and conducted a review of city positions resulting in a cut of 133 vacant jobs, saving \$4.7 million in the 2019 city budget. Woodfin released “The Woodfin Way,”⁷ his plan for the next four years, in March 2018 with the tagline “Putting People First.” However, local neighborhoods were not part of his “people.” The 2019 budget included no city funding for potholes except for \$2.2 million from ALDOT, the state transportation agency, for truck-route paving. The city was filling severe potholes on the city’s West Side with dirt. While locals could not get roads repaired, Woodfin jumped on plans for a \$2.5 million, four-block bike trail over Red Mountain to the suburban community of Homewood.

⁴ See: www.al.com/news/birmingham/index.ssf/2017/08/birmingham_municipal_election.html.

⁵ See: www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/randall-woodfin-elected-mayor-of-birmingham-alabama_us_59d416bfe4b04b9f9205eb9a.

⁶ See, for example: www.al.com/news/birmingham/index.ssf/2018/06/uab_to_pay_25000_a_game_to_lea.html.

⁷ Website: www.birminghamal.gov/woodfinway.

Figure 1. Unrepaired sidewalks in Birmingham’s Glen Iris Neighborhood raise questions about progressive Mayor Woodfin’s plan to put people first over megadevelopments.



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The rebuilding and expansion of Interstate 20/59 around its intersection with Interstate 65 resulted in the removal of a local community. The city is using federal funds received for this removal to build a linear park under the pylons of these major interstates; there is no word on where future maintenance funds will come from. Funds to each of the city’s 99 neighborhoods were

reduced to \$2,000 per neighborhood. The Birmingham city schools received no increased funding either. Woodfin removed \$1.5 million of funds to REV Birmingham, a local nonprofit that has created numerous redevelopment projects throughout the city's neighborhoods, leading to the cancellation of a program to bring fresh produce to underserved neighborhood shops. Then, Woodfin redirected \$1.5 million to Shipt, a private grocery-shopping firm just bought out by Minneapolis-based Target, in an effort to attract "talent." Mayor Woodfin also approved up to \$1.5 million for a private restaurant company to open in the Negro Southern League Baseball Museum,⁸ paying for a fully outfitted kitchen, supplies, and two years of tax abatements. Woodfin's recent actions also suggest he is creating his own Democratic machine instead of pushing for a more inclusive and progressive leadership structure in Birmingham. With the resignation of one city-council member for a family job relocation and two others departing after being elected Jefferson County Commission Board members in fall 2018, Woodfin and city-council president Valerie Abbott determined that the city did not have the funds to run three special elections to fill the remaining three years of the council members' terms. Instead, the city council will nominate and vote on replacements—with the first being Woodfin's former head of the Birmingham City School Board, over a West Side black community leader who became one of Woodfin's main critics. Thus, Woodfin will have appointed one third of the nine-member city council.

A true progressive?

Some local residents have been so discouraged by Woodfin that they sarcastically refer to him as "Bellfin," a portmanteau reference to the former mayor. In the election, Woodfin even brought in Bernie Sanders for a support visit despite Woodfin's role as chair of the Hillary Clinton election campaign. Like his new colleagues in New Orleans and Jackson, Woodfin posed with Alexandria Osacio-Cortez at the 2018 Netroots Convention, noting in his Tweet he was proud "to share the stage tonight with an unabashedly progressive leader..." While he builds his progressive reputation nationally, local residents may wonder what happened to the candidate they elected to rebuild roads and sidewalks, not multimillion-dollar bike lanes. The week of August 27, 2018, Woodfin surprised residents by announcing the city had a \$10 million budget surplus. While 20%, as required by city charter, will go to a rainy-day fund, Woodfin announced \$4 million for neighborhood street paving and sidewalk repair. Maybe the progressive mayor that was elected will finally take office.

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⁸ See, for example: <https://birminghamwatch.org/neighborhood-economic-development-groups-protest-woodfins-budget>.

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