Regionalism and Legitimacy
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Dr. Zack Taylor
Dept. of Political Science and
Local Government Program
Western University
London, Ontario

Western SocialScience
Local Government Program
http://localgovernment.uwo.ca
Introduction

As we all know, Vancouver and the Lower Mainland have a remarkable history of regional governance and planning. Indeed, there may perhaps be no better place in which to ponder what is a very old dilemma—how to govern and plan the expanding urban region.

The title that frames this conference is “rethinking the region.” The notion that the region needs to be rethought betrays a certain malaise, I think. Is the region—or, more particularly, Vancouver’s brand of regionalism—truly in need of rethinking? Is Metro Vancouver at a crossroads, or merely experiencing a moment of self-doubt—a blip in what has been a very long-term trajectory of success?

The task I have set for myself today is to reflect on the sources of Lower Mainland’s relative success. Without giving away my punchline, my conclusion is that Greater Vancouver’s regional governance is as healthy as it has ever been. The problem, it seems to me, lies with the province, which has not done enough to enable and support regional choices.

At the dawn of the postwar period this was much like any other North American urban region of similar size and age. Outside of the City of Vancouver, urban development was largely unregulated. Ribbon development extended out like vines into Surrey, Langley, and beyond. Patchy subdivision splayed south across the Fraser and eastwards into the agricultural lands of the valley. Large residential zones remained serviced by septic tanks rather than trunk sewers, not only at the fringe, but in the core as well. There was no relationship between servicing and subdivision control.

In 1961, the authors of a Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board report could write that:

“The spread of Greater Vancouver … consists of city-type houses on city-size lots, sprinkled about the countryside. … It can best be described as little bits of city in the wrong place. … With only 750 square miles of usable land in the Lower Mainland the sprawl belt encompasses around 100 square miles.”
Today, after 60 years of incremental development of institutions and implementation of policies, we see a quite different metropolis. Urban areas are fully serviced by trunk water and sewer infrastructure. Policy has enforced a strict separation between urban and non-urban land uses, and the “sprawl belt” of 1961 is being filled in.

Vancouver is the only North American region in which the rate of rural land consumption is less than that of population growth. Instead of flattening, as elsewhere, the density gradient from core to periphery is becoming steeper. Densification has occurred not only through brownfield redevelopment, but also through the broad-based redevelopment of established residential areas. Indeed, the size of the region’s single-detached housing stock is decreasing in absolute terms.

We can debate the substance of these goals and their economic, social, and environmental effects. But the fact remains that Lower Mainlanders chose their future. They—you—made this happen. There was nothing automatic about it.

So how did local actors devise and implement a coherent land-use policy over an extended period of time to a degree that has eluded almost every other urban region in North America?
To answer this question, I will lay out a framework through which we can understand the legitimacy of the regional perspective on governance. Indeed, I will argue that creating and sustaining legitimacy is the core problem of regional governance.

Without legitimacy, there is no influence. There is no capacity to act. Legitimate authorities tend to be effective because their subjects more often than not go along with their decisions, plans, or frameworks. Authorities seen as illegitimate tend to be ineffective, because their subjects engage in resistance or subversion. The cultivation and maintenance of legitimacy is a dynamic and often conflictual process, one that requires constant reinvention and renewal of champions.

I will first discuss why regionalism struggles for legitimacy. I will then interpret the development of regional governance in Greater Vancouver as a struggle for legitimacy, making a comparison with Portland, Oregon. And finally, I will offer some commentary on the present situation.

**Perspectives on governance: Regionalism, localism, sovereignty**

Legitimacy is the core problem of regionalism because the regional perspective on governance is at a systemic political disadvantage relative to other perspectives whose legitimacy is more entrenched.

So what competes with regionalism?

The first competitor is localism. The belief in community self-determination is deeply embedded in Anglo-American political culture. While limited in its capacities and activities, local government is often portrayed as the building block of democracy, its institutions the closest and most accessible to the people.

Localist rhetoric pervades debates. Here are two examples that could have been said yesterday, but in fact were uttered during the development of the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board’s 1966 Official Regional Plan.

- “All we want is to be left alone, but you won’t let us.” Reeve Simpson of Chilliwack

- “The council … is elected by the residents of today and not by future generations, and must give consideration to the wishes of those who elected them.” Langley District Councillor Bill Blair

This is the essence of localism: accountability through home rule.
The second competing perspective is what we might call sovereignty. The federal and provincial governments are sovereign powers, their authority derived from the founding constitutional documents. While distant from the people, sovereignty is the ultimate collective expression of the popular will, and the building block of the international system.

Regionalism is the notion that some problems can only be solved at scale that lies between these two scales—between the local and the sovereign.

The regional idea has always emerged to address this governance gap that neither local nor higher-level governments can fill because they lack the jurisdiction, capacity, or electoral incentive to do so.

Viewed historically, we see that the localist and sovereign perspectives predate regionalism by many centuries. The modern nation-state has been around for half a millennium. The self-governing municipal corporation goes back even further. Sovereign and local institutions are mature and their legal status secure. Regionalism is the new kid on the block, emerging only with industrialization and urbanization in the nineteenth century.

How then can regionalism elbow its way in to find a legitimate role in a political space that is monopolized by local and sovereign authorities?

Sources of legitimacy: Input, output, throughput

To answer this question, we must understand where legitimacy comes from. If we know where it comes from, we can think about how to redesign institutions and reorient organizational behaviours to reinforce the legitimacy of the regional perspective.

Political scientist Fritz Scharpf proposes that there are three types of legitimacy, each of which is derived from a different source.
The first is input legitimacy. This is about representation—how decision-making bodies are constituted—by direct election or indirectly, by delegates of other elected bodies. In our political culture, directly elected bodies are typically viewed as more legitimate than ones that are appointed.

The second is output legitimacy, which stems from perceptions of performance. Stakeholders will confer legitimacy on institutions and policies if they benefit from the results.

The third type, throughput legitimacy, accrues from perceptions of the processes that link inputs and outputs: accountability for decisions, transparency of decision-making, efficiency of operations, and fair treatment of stakeholders.

Let’s compare regional institutions to provincial and local ones so we can better understand the nature of the legitimacy disadvantage and, on this basis, see how it may be overcome.

On the input side, provincial and local governments are directly elected, which creates a focus for political accountability through the electoral process.

On the output side, provincial and local governments also deliver programs and operate infrastructure systems that are visible to individuals, households, and businesses.

Turning to throughput legitimacy, we know that provincial and local institutions receive greater media scrutiny than regional ones. They are also subject to systematic independent audit, and they are legally required to inform and consult stakeholders and the general public.

By contrast, most regional institutions, including British Columbia’s regional districts, the former Metro Toronto, and American councils of governments, function at a remove from individuals, households, and businesses. Whether they are structured as federations of municipalities or agencies of senior governments, their decision-making bodies are composed of delegates or appointees of other governments. In this sense, they have less input legitimacy than local and sovereign governments.
On the output side, regional institutions that manage infrastructure systems tend to be structured as wholesalers rather than retailers of services. While local and provincial governments provide services and benefits directly to individuals, households, and firms, regional authorities often work through local governments. While Metro Vancouver operates trunk water and sewer services, this role is invisible to property owners because they purchase services from municipal utilities.

While regional bodies often make long-term land-use and infrastructure plans, they rarely have the power to implement them through regulation. From the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board through to Metro Vancouver, regional planning has taken the form of articulating goals, principles, and a schematic land-use concept that is given effect by local governments through official community plans and zoning bylaws.

All of this illustrates that regional ideas, and regional institutions, often occupy a precarious space. Regionalism is sandwiched between, and often squeezed out, by local and provincial authorities that draw input legitimacy from direct election, and output legitimacy from the services they deliver directly to residents and businesses.

Simply, regional institutions don’t get credit, or blame, for their work because they rarely touch individuals and businesses directly.

**Legitimizing regionalism**

So where does this leave regionalism? Given this position of disadvantage, from where can regional governance draw legitimacy?

Short of the provincial government taking on direct authority for regional land-use and infrastructure planning and service delivery, as occurs in Australian states, or consolidating local governments to create a region-wide single-tier municipality, I see little potential to fundamentally alter perceptions of the input and output legitimacy of regional institutions.

Indeed, there are may be very good reasons for regional authorities to operate at a remove. Staying out of the parcel-by-parcel weeds may help maintain a clear focus on the long-term planning and management of regional systems.
Direct election is one solution, but it may hurt as much as it helps.

Switching to direct election in 1988 was supposed to reinforce Metro Toronto’s legitimacy. Instead, it removed the constituent municipalities’ stake in metropolitan questions, generating new conflicts between them and Metro.

If we examine the history of North American regionalism closely, we find that the greatest potential for increasing the legitimacy of regional planning lies in the throughput dimension, and in particular the way regional institutions cultivate and manage relationships with organized stakeholders, and with the public at large, building trust and durable support coalitions along the way.

**Vancouver and Portland**

Let me now compare the stories of Vancouver and Portland. Both, as we know, are regarded as the most successful regional planning agencies in North America. The two regions make for a good comparison because they share important characteristics:

- Similar population size and growth rates throughout the postwar period
• A constrained physical environment in which there is direct conflict between urbanization, agriculture, and natural resource extraction

• A populist, polarized political culture that values local autonomy and private property rights

In both places the legitimacy of regional planning was painstakingly constructed, bit by bit, in an unlikely and inhospitable environment. This occurred through strategic interaction with other actors—local governments, advocacy groups, and the public at large.

Now, importantly, we must recognize that Portland Metro and Metro Vancouver are quite different regional institutions. Both create long-range urban growth strategies, yet only Metro Vancouver operates infrastructure systems. While Portland Metro is directly elected and has no institutional relationship with local government, Metro Vancouver’s boards are made up delegates from municipal councils.

In both places, transit services are operated by independent bodies. In Portland, transportation planning is led by Portland Metro, not TriMet, whereas in Vancouver it is done by Translink.

Their success at shaping urban development despite their very different institutional structures suggests that there is no one best way to organize regional governance.

The basis of regional institutions’ capacity to shape urban development is not so much a matter of inputs (the nature of political representation) or outputs (service delivery performance) as it is a matter of throughput—the cultivation of relationships and external support.
The Vancouver story

Let’s first turn to the Vancouver story.

The origin of inter-municipal collaboration in Greater Vancouver is the province’s creation, at municipal request, of the Greater Vancouver Sewerage and Drainage District in 1913. Vancouver’s original sewer system failed early in the 20th century. As the drainage areas crossed local government boundaries, the chief engineers of Vancouver and its smaller neighbours jointly hired Montreal engineer RS Lea to study how to solve the emerging public health crisis.

Lea designed not only a sewer system, but also an institution to manage it, structured as a federation of municipalities.

The province supported this bureaucratic project by incorporating the board and guaranteeing its long-term debt. A water supply board was later piggybacked onto it in 1924. Due to Lea’s flexible design, whereby municipalities paid in in proportion to their share of regional tax assessment, the two boards expanded to include additional municipalities as urbanization spread outwards. With modification, this was the template for the regional districts when they were created in the 1960s.

Importantly, these districts brought municipal politicians and staff into routine interaction with each other, engendering trust and compromise.

While ordinary people were likely unaware of these bodies, municipal leaders saw them as legitimate actors, supporting their work and their expansion over time.

After the war, the province enabled the creation of inter-municipal regional planning boards. The Lower Mainland Board was created in 1949. Similar to the sewer and water boards, it was structured as a federation of the region’s 28 municipalities. By 1952, it was fully up and running with a full-time executive director, the late Jim Wilson.
Much of the Board’s time was consumed with building relationships. While separate from the infrastructure districts, it worked with them to ensure that infrastructure supported its emerging vision of a polycentric region in which fully serviced urban areas were separate from rural lands.

Jim Wilson worked closely with the municipal delegates on his board. Many of these served for considerable lengths of time—of the 183 people who served on the Board between 1949 and 1969, 55 served for four years or more. This built trust across municipal boundaries.

Wilson and his staff also visited municipal councils and staff monthly. He also initiated a planning assistance program, whereby the Board prepared municipal plans and zoning bylaws on a fee-for-service basis. He later characterized planning assistance as a Trojan Horse strategy to build support for the idea of land-use regulation, and for the legitimacy of regional planning itself.

More than once they were confronted by hostile crowds as they moved toward the adoption of an Official Regional Plan. While some municipal politicians and local business associations publicly protested the development of a region-wide zoning plan, only Langley District ultimately withheld consent. As the support of only two-thirds of members were required, the official regional plan took effect in 1966.

Provincial support was key. Minister Dan Campbell and Deputy Minister James Everett Brown exercised quiet suasion to bring municipalities on side.

By the end of the 1960s, a half-century of interaction through the infrastructure boards and 20 years of cooperation on regional planning had cemented inter-municipal collaboration. Through this constructive engagement, local politicians and their staff came to see regional institutions and their activities as legitimate.

This technical consensus on goals threatened to come undone in the early 1970s. As elsewhere in North America, ordinary people became increasingly skeptical of government and expert knowledge. Environmentalists framed urban development not as a positive by-product of economic growth, but as a harmful force to be contained.
To survive, regional planning would have to be seen as legitimate not simply by municipalities and political leaders, but also by the public at large.

A new generation of planners at the GVRD, which had assumed authority over the regional plan, recognized that efficiency of land use was no longer a sufficient objective. To be legitimate, regional planning would have to appeal to the emotions and aspirations of ordinary people.

To understand what people felt and believed, the visionary planning chief Harry Lash engaged in an unprecedented public engagement process. What they discovered through this process is that residents were concerned about growth as a threat to livability, and so the notion of preserving and enhancing livability became the hook on which planning would hang.

At is that this stage that the regionalism’s legitimacy was put to the test. In 1983, the provincial government responded to economic recession with a radical program of austerity and deregulation. Regional planning was abolished and existing official regional plans were annulled.

Despite its legal abolition, inter-municipal collaboration on matters of regional urban development continued, propelled by the strength of established relationships between municipal leaders and planning staff, many of whom had participated in the GVRD’s early 1970s planning efforts.

This was kicked into high gear in the late 1980s, when Gordon Campbell and Ken Cameron aggressively built public and municipal support for a new regional planning vision—the Livable Region Strategic Plan. The mass outreach program was repeated, and the livability theme updated for a new generation.
In the mid-1990s, a new provincial government created a new statutory basis for planning, one that mandated municipal consensus on regional planning issues. In essence, the law codified a half-century and more of established collaborative practice.

Now, as those in this room know, it was not all Kumbaya. At every stage, in the 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s, there have been very real disagreements and conflicts. The influence of regional institutions has ebbed and flowed over the decades. Like monsters in horror movies, the same conflicts keep coming back again and again—over population and employment forecasts and land-use conversion, for example.

As an outsider, what I find remarkable is not that there is conflict. What I find remarkable is that the system holds together at all. Decades later, the contours of the vision crafted by Jim Wilson and his staff in the 1950s and 1960s and updated by Harry Lash in the 1970s remain intact. This is because Greater Vancouver’s leaders have continued to reproduce the legitimacy of regionalism through constructive engagement with outside actors.

The Portland story

We can see similar dynamics in the Portland region. The emergence of regional cooperation and planning emerged only gradually in Portland and, compared to Vancouver, much more recently. Efforts to leverage federal mandates to create effective regional land-use and infrastructure coordination in the 1960s and 1970s were largely unsuccessful.

A Metropolitan Service District was created in 1969 to consolidate the region’s patchwork of small water, sewer, and other service districts, but this never happened. The regional planning agency, called CRAG, was resented and resisted by member municipalities and counties. Much of the leverage CRAG had exercised over the shape of urban development disappeared when President Reagan abolished federal support for regional planning.

Neither institution possessed much, if any, legitimacy on the basis of representation, interactions with stakeholders and the public, or outputs.
Their consolidation into an elected body in 1979, today’s Portland Metro, did nothing to increase the meagre legal authority and resources they possessed. Early failures did little to inspire trust and confidence. In its early days local pressure resulted in a permissive approach to the state-mandated urban growth boundary.

From this inauspicious beginning, Portland Metro slowly gained legitimacy not primarily from being directly elected, but from a diligently pursued and multi-pronged program of engagement with municipalities, interest groups, and the general public.

Downtown business leaders saw regional planning as means of reversing downtown decline, while urban property developers came to appreciate the investment certainty provided by coordinated planning. Exurban farmers who were instinctively suspicious of land-use regulation saw benefit in rural land protection.

Perhaps most importantly, the environmental group the 1000 Friends of Oregon became a vigorous funder of outside research and a defender of regional planning in the legislature and the courts. This carefully nurtured external support coalition insulated Portland Metro from challenge from an unpredictable state legislature and citizen-initiated challenges at the ballot.

Metro also emerged as a convenor of local governments for long-term transportation planning, bringing municipal, county, and state officials, as well as TriMet, into routinized interaction.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Portland Metro leveraged its support coalition and role as an intergovernmental convenor to take on a more direct role in planning the region. Supported by Metro’s staff, committees of elected municipal officials and state agency representatives developed regional planning goals while simultaneously engaging the public through public meetings, focus groups, walking tours, a media campaign. The regional plan’s development also gained attention through the public advocacy of external proxies, including 1000 Friends.

In the end, the Metro 2040 Growth Concept was successfully adopted in 1995, and its implementation has continued despite ongoing threats, because local governments were bound to the process, in effect co-designing the plan, and because Metro reinforced its legitimacy through the cultivation of outside support.
Conclusion: Legitimacy takes work

These stories illustrate the importance of relationships to the legitimacy of regional institutions and activities, and therefore to their influence and effectiveness. While formal powers are important, their exercise is contingent on support from stakeholders and, ultimately, the public. Building legitimacy through interaction takes time and hard work. Metro Vancouver and Portland Metro work as well as they do because they have creatively elbowed their way in and actively navigated the conflicting interests of a diverse ecosystem of powerful actors.

I say this as someone from Ontario, where the entire system of planning and infrastructure governance operates in a top-down, command-and-control fashion. The results are no better, because the system is virtually designed to create conflict among municipalities and between municipalities and the provincial government. The result has been a forty-year-long slow-burning legitimacy crisis in which everyone, and yet no one, is in charge.

As the Toronto region continues to add 100,000 new residents per year, its transportation infrastructure deficit is so profound that even today’s multi-billion dollar expansion projects will barely bend the transportation behaviour curve. Believe me, Vancouver, you’ve got it good.

Let me conclude, then, with two observations.

First, regionalists should never become complacent. Never believe that past successes will guarantee future ones. Legitimacy can only be sustained through active investment in productive relationships, open communication, and accountability.

The recent failure of the transit funding referendum illustrates what happens when legitimacy ebbs, much as the development of the Livable Region Strategic Plan in the late 1980s shows that legitimacy can compensate for the absence of statutory authority. Crucially, popular support matters. Regardless of how institutions are set up, regionalism must engage the public, not just local governments and other formal stakeholders.

Second, as I have observed the Vancouver region story from the outside, I am disappointed by the often antagonistic or obstructive behaviour of the provincial government. When you go through the ministerial files from the 1950s and 1960s in the archives, you find that the provincial government played a quiet enabling role, supporting regional problem-solving without engaging in direct coercion.
• When growing suburban municipalities refused to join the sewerage and drainage district in the 1950s, Minister Wesley Black created incentives that brought them on side.

• When roughly seven Lower Mainland municipalities refused at the last minute to endorse the 1966 official regional plan, Minister Dan Campbell worked directly and through the Social Credit caucus to quietly bring them on side.

• In the early- to mid-1970s, the provincial government applied quiet suasion to consolidate services into the new regional districts.

Throughout, the province created the conditions for the region’s municipalities to help themselves. This was not simply benevolence. It was a deliberate political strategy. The province had no desire to bring itself into overt conflict with localism—a conflict it could well lose. Like a judo master, it turned localism on itself, creating the conditions for localism to be accommodated to the regional perspective without compromising their accountability to their electors.

Today’s problems are different from those of the 1950s and 1960s. Local and regional governments are now fully capable of collaboratively managing land use and operating infrastructure systems. The region’s actors no longer need to be persuaded of the benefits of regional planning. The broad contours of the land-use vision are broadly accepted.

The core problem since the 1990s is how to support the land-use vision with costly up-front investments in mobility systems, the scale of which is beyond the capacity of local governments. Once again, the region needs the province to be a constructive partner that creates and sustains the conditions for inter-municipal goal-setting and decision-making. But more than this, it needs the province to provide access to resources to make the expenditures the region needs.

Unfortunately, the province has been a fair-weather friend since the 1980s, acting unilaterally to undermine regional institutions and decisions. The abolition of regional planning authority in 1983 may have strengthened the inter-municipal collaboration in the long run, but it also weakened the regulatory toolkit.

Unilateral fiscal choices have undermined the integration of land-use and infrastructure planning: for example, the truncation of the Millennium Line and the widening of the Port Mann bridge.
Constituting TransLink separately from the GVRD also seems to me to be inconsistent with the region’s long-term institutional development. And vesting transportation planning in Translink rather than in the GVRD has severed the potential for a tight linkage between land-use and transportation planning and created new conflicts between rival bureaucracies.

My recommendation to the province would be to take a lesson from its predecessors. Keep out of the weeds and avoid unnecessary political entanglements by supporting regional collaboration and providing resources. If the region’s municipalities want to work together to tax their residents for transit, let them—and let them be accountable for it.

It has taken Greater Vancouver a century to evolve the regional planning and operating institutions it has today. These institutions embody an almost unique collaborative ethic that has legitimized the idea of the region, of regional plans and policies, of regional authority. Everyone’s task now, and especially the provincial government’s, should be to sustain and nurture this problem-solving capacity that has served Greater Vancouver so well, and for so long.

About the author

Dr. Zack Taylor is Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Political Science and Local Government Program at Western University in London, Ontario, and a non-practicing Registered Professional Planner. His research focuses on historical and contemporary urban and regional planning and governance, with a particular focus on the Vancouver and Toronto regions. He can be reached at zack.taylor@uwo.ca.