Local government politics and political institutions are undergoing rapid changes as they adapt to changing social, political, and economic conditions. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing local governments in the coming years lies in forging new understandings of how to govern in a world increasingly beset by new institutional forms, like private government and quasi-governmental institutions, and by constantly changing populations. We selected the articles included in this symposium with these challenges in mind. These papers were initially presented at a conference supported by Florida State University’s DeVoe Moore Center in February 2006. The call for papers for the symposium was issued broadly, and the eight articles published here were among ten presented at the meeting. We selected papers that addressed issues of political behavior, the development of public and private institutions, and the intersection of behavior and institutions in the practice of local government.

The initial two articles focus on the structure and functions of new forms of governments in cities. Robert Nelson describes the rise of private governments as providers of public services in urban areas. He reports on the explosive growth of neighborhood associations in the United States, discusses the evolution of a variety of types of private associations, and argues that state governments should alter their constitutions to better accommodate the reality of private governance institutions. In their article, Barbara Coyle McCabe and Jill Tao examine the scope of activities undertaken by homeowner associations. They report data from a national survey of homeowner associations undertaken with the cooperation of the peak professional group that represents them. They portray an industry in which organizations appear to be more interested in providing limited services to supplement those provided by local governments than in supplanting local governments. However, to the extent that private associations are able to provide services without duplicating what their members are paying for through taxation, they are willing to do so. McCabe and Tao point to a large new agenda for public services research and for students of public management, as privatized governments are in many ways hybrid organizations with powers, responsibilities, and career ladders that differ from either fully public or private organizations.
Christine Kelleher’s article addresses a key question about urban governance. She asks how metropolitan context affects representation, focusing on the size of urban government and the extent to which governments are fragmented as opposed to consolidated. An absence of good comparable data has blocked empirical research into this question. Kelleher puts to good use a set of survey data made available by the Knight Foundation. While the data are not perfect for her purposes, as secondary data seldom are, her results are interesting inasmuch as they call into question the assumption that local governments are able to behave as rational utility maximizers. In contrast to others’ findings, Kelleher reports that larger cities appear to have the most responsive governments and that governmental responsiveness appears to increase as populations become more diverse. Although her results are somewhat tentative, they point to a promising agenda for further research. The article by Ken Bickers and Richard Engstrom is linked in some ways to Kelleher’s in that these authors present a method for simulating population movements into and out of cities consistent with the influential Tiebout sorting hypothesis. They report evidence of sorting in cities, but they likewise report that the sorting appears not to be driven by race or other pernicious influences widely thought to drive shifts in urban populations. This result leads them to conclude that it may be more fruitful to think of sorting in more technical terms as it relates to things like the scope of government services, and less in terms of political—for example, race—ways.

Jeremy Groves’s analysis of the voting behavior of members of homeowner associations in St. Louis County, Missouri, likewise provides some empirical insights on several key arguments that frequent discussions about urban politics. One claim is that homeowner associations tend to cluster people according to economic characteristics; since more affluent people tend to live in homeowner associations, it follows that the creation of these associations should create blocs of Republican voters in suburbs. Groves’s analysis does not bear this out: he shows that with proper controls inserted, there is no effect of membership in a homeowner association and voting Republican. However, he shows that membership is associated with opposition to property tax increases. In light of the interests of most associations (and homeowners), this makes sense: both want to retain the value of housing, and Groves’s results suggest that voters are successful in discriminating between partisan politics and pocketbook politics. This reinforces McCabe and Tao’s portrayal of associations as being interested principally in maintaining profitability and not being especially political beyond narrow interests of their communities.

While Robert Nelson provides a description of various types of private governments that exist, he does little to explain why they emerge other than to claim that they may come into being because governments fail to fill a niche or because citizens otherwise demand them. Most members of homeowner associations do not seek them out: they belong as a condition of purchasing their homes and consciously decide to join only by agreeing to submit to the covenant’s requirements when they buy the property. Leah Brooks addresses a different sort of private government in her article: a business improvement district (BID). Brooks uses a unique dataset on the adoption of BIDs in California to model their emergence. Her work points to an important distinction between BIDs and homeowner associations. BIDs seem to emerge where heterogeneity is low, while homeowner associations are
linked to high heterogeneity. BIDs involve a group of businesses voting under some agreed upon supermajority rule to tax themselves to pay for various improvements in some geographic area. Homeowner associations are typically created by developers to help finance infrastructure and enforce covenants that will retain housing values in a development. Brooks’s research reveals these to be products of very different impulses, thereby illustrating that private governments may be formed to meet a variety of needs and may emerge from widely divergent politics.

David Laslo and Dennis Judd describe how local government institutions emerge and disappear as they seek to fill the gaps in the ability to govern that sometimes plague general purpose governments. They argue that large-scale changes that have been wrought by large shifts in the economy, by the emergence of various special interest districts and private governments, and other changes in local organization create an opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to emerge and to be successful in securing personal goals in the public arena. Laslo and Judd use a case study of the St. Louis, Missouri, region to illustrate how entrepreneurs, freed of the constraints imposed by some institutions, are better able to achieve their goals than are elected officials. They describe a changed power structure in which persons affiliated with quasi-governmental organizations, in league with members of the business community and elected officials, are key players in local politics and development. One implication of this is that development in St. Louis and, to the extent other cities elsewhere are comparable, will become increasingly homogenous as this trend continues.

Finally, David Kimball and Martha Kropf report on a massive data collection effort on a tremendously understudied area: the administration of local elections. Their report, likely the first of several that should flow from this foundational dataset, describes how local elections are governed in the United States. This is important work not only for the obvious reasons that were revealed by the 2000 and to a lesser extent 2004 elections, but also because it represents a key area of governance about which scholars know very little.

The papers collected here address some of the key questions of current urban politics and policy research. They offer new evidence, present new insights, and suggest a variety of fruitful research agendas for those interested in the study of local governance. We are grateful to the authors for the papers they produced for the symposium, to the DeVoe Moore Center for its financial and other support, and to the Review of Policy Research for providing a forum for their rapid publication.