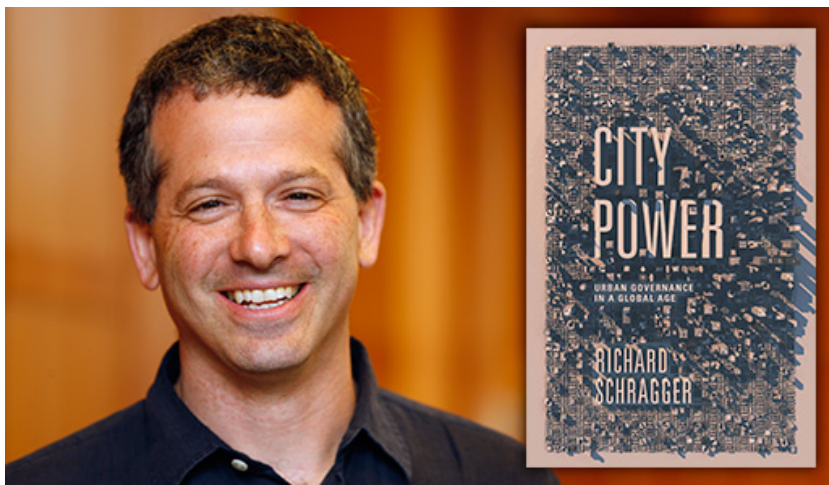




NEWS & EVENTS

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Cities Have More Sway Than Often Perceived, Professor Richard Schragger Says in New Book



Professor Richard Schragger's scholarship focuses on the intersection of constitutional law and local government law, federalism, urban policy and the constitutional and economic status of cities.

A city doesn't have to be big and economically powerful in order to influence the world and control its own destiny. But it does need the cooperation of state and national leaders, who often stand in the way.

That's the message behind "City Power: Urban Governance in a Global Age," a new book by University of Virginia School of Law professor [Richard Schragger](#), who is an expert in local government law. The [book](#) will be officially released by [Oxford University Press](#) in October.

"The main claim is we should let cities govern, and cities can govern if we let them," Schragger said. "Cities have more capacity to address important issues, especially issues such as economic inequality, than we give them credit for."

He said one powerful example that cities can make major changes on their own is the minimum wage, or "living wage," movement.

"The traditional view, the conventional view is you can't pass a minimum wage at the city level — that [would] be economically foolhardy — you can only do it at the national level," Schragger said. "That just has been shown not to be true."

Schragger addressed other common misconceptions about cities for his book. One myth is that only big cities such as the New Yorks and San Franciscos of the world have power, while small cities have little

or none. But, he said, many smaller cities have pursued wage and labor, anti-discrimination and environmental laws, often effectively.

Cities do run into obstacles, though. "It is not that cities are incapable of adopting legislation in these areas, but that state legislators often refuse to let them," he said. He pointed to municipal broadband as one recent area of conflict. Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Wilson, North Carolina, sought to expand access to the internet for their citizens, only to be blocked by state laws permitting private providers to maintain their local monopolies.

Another false premise is that cities that do poorly underperform because they have been mismanaged. He said the state takeover of Detroit's government, in the wake of the largest municipal bankruptcy in the nation's history, is an example of that assumption.

"State takeovers are presented as technocratic fixes for failures in municipal government, but the cities that have been taken over have generally been poor and heavily minority," Schragger said. "Their problems are a result of deindustrialization, state and federal policies that have encouraged 'white flight,' and years of state neglect."

Schragger argues that mismanagement is often a symptom of city decline, not the cause. He called any move to suspend elective municipal government "anti-democratic."

"Some cities are economically ascendant, and some are in decline," he said. "What we tend to do is blame the cities that are in decline for their decline, when there are other forces often at work."

Such forces also include changing consumer patterns, demographic shifts, or state and federal housing, land use and education policies, he said. He pointed out that in the early 1970s many people would have said Detroit was still on the rise, and that New York City was in decline.

The overarching problem, according to Schragger, is the way people think about cities.

UVA Law Professor Rich Schragger Discusses New Book, "City Power"



"We often talk about cities as being 'in competition' with each other, treating them like businesses providing a certain kind of 'product' in the marketplace for local governments," he said. "We tell those cities they have to be better, because they are in competition with other cities. And the winners are the cities that are doing well, and the losers are the cities that aren't doing well. This is a very simplistic way of thinking about the economies of cities."

Schragger said cities can't control all aspects of their destiny, but they are better positioned to address difficult and intractable policy problems than they are often given credit for.

"Around the globe, nations seem paralyzed by ideological gridlock and political partisanship," he said.

"Cities can provide an alternative to distant and ineffectual national governments, and beholden and gerrymandered state leadership."

But to chart a course, Schragger said, cities need respect: "State and national leaders have to get out of their way."

"Central government officials often talk about devolving power to local governments, but they rarely follow through," he said. "Cities can provide a model of accessible, democratic government — something sorely needed in this age of political alienation and anger."

Schragger is the Perre Bowen Professor of Law and the Joseph C. Carter, Jr. Research Professor of Law. His scholarship focuses on the intersection of constitutional law and local government law, federalism, urban policy and the constitutional and economic status of cities. He also writes about law and religion. Schragger teaches property, local government law, urban law and policy, and church and state.

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