



Governance by Decree: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act in Dallas (Studies in Government and Public Policy) (Studies in Government & Public Policy)

Ruth P. Morgan

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The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which originally was intended to prohibit barriers to black registration and voting, has been hailed as a triumph for civil rights and as a catalyst for the election of minorities to public office in both the Deep South and the urban North. To advance its objective, federal courts instructed many cities to change from at-large to single-member district electoral systems as a way to ensure that minorities had a reasonable chance to elect representatives of their choice.

In the first book to critique the implementation of this landmark legislation in a major American city, Ruth Morgan examines its effect on local governance over forty years in Dallas and shows that it had unintended consequences for racial politics, representation, and public policy. Breaking from studies that measure the success of the VRA in terms of increased minority representation, Morgan assesses the consequences of the Act for Dallas city government and for the wider interests of minorities as well.

While endorsing the original intent of the VRA, Morgan believes that this intent was subverted by subsequent amendments to the Act and by the courts' attempts to advance the political standing of particular minority groups. She argues that court-imposed single-member districts have created in Dallas a city council infected with parochialism and careerism a result of members no longer having to compromise to win citywide votes and have had an adverse impact on governmental effectiveness and voter turnout. With corruption and cronyism now rampant, voting rights legislation and litigation have ultimately failed to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the unempowered, and the district system has created an incentive for continued racial separation.

Governance by Decree offers a pointed assessment of the complexities and contradictions produced by the voting rights law, while at the same time calling for the federal judiciary to exercise restraint in imposing its will when it lacks the capacity to make choices that are inherently political. Morgan's powerfully argued case study should inspire much debate and inform forthcoming congressional deliberations over the renewal of the preclearance section of the VRA in 2007.

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