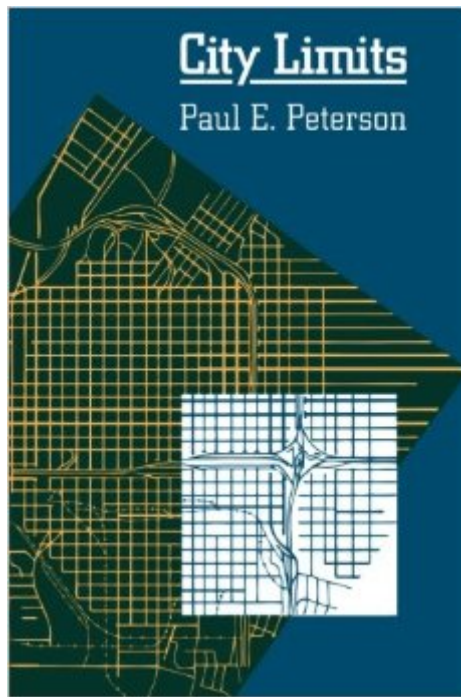


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# City Limits



## Synopsis

Winner of the 1981 Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award for the best book published in the United States on government, politics, or international affairs. "City Limits radically reinterprets urban politics by deriving its dominant forces from the logic of the American federal structure. It is thereby able to explain some pervasive tendencies of urban political outcomes that are puzzling or scarcely noticed at all when cities are viewed as autonomous units, outside the federal framework. Professor Peterson's analysis is imaginatively conceived and skillfully carried through. His beautifully finished volume will lastingly alter our understanding of urban affairs in America." —from the citation by the selection committee for the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award

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## Customer Reviews

Paul Peterson makes an obvious point: there are limits to the service obligations cities can safely take on. However, it is substantially more complex than that commonsensical point. Cities face a dilemma, they must balance the requirements they have to provide services with the tax loads they can adequately impose on their citizens. Provide too little in the way of services and the quality of life in the city suffers. Provide too many or too varied a service mix and the taxing requirements to fund these services will drive the productive population beyond the physical limits of the city. Cities must provide services to the poor. If they do not, the social pathologies of the poor then drive down the attractiveness of the city as a place for entrepreneurial activity. So cities must spend and tax productive populations (those consuming services in a negative ratio to the taxes they contribute) in

order to fund these services. However, tax too much and provide too many services and the productive populations will exit the city to more tax friendly areas. Due to the spatial limits of cities, cities cannot extend their taxing reach. Thus cities must provide the bare essentials and encourage economic growth. The solution to the dilemma is to allow the federal government to provide the majority of redistributive (aid to the poor) services and focus, as a city, on the provision of distributive (road repair, police) and regulatory services (health, sanitation). Not a ringing cry to help your fellow man, but a cogent analysis of the fiscal demands and limitations facing urban America. Urbanists, planners and public administration scholars will encounter this book somewhere in their professional training. John C. McKee

This is an important book for people interested in urban studies to read. It has made some people angry (see Imbroscio, 2003 for more details), but it deserves to be read to get a grounding in Urban Political theory. It discusses why local politics are different. It explains the types of policies cities create (developmental, allocation, and redistributive). It discusses why cities do not generally get into the welfare policy business. Some believe that Peterson's "Unitary" interest of cities is incorrect in that politics do matter and that cities do not just have one interest of developmental politics. Nevertheless, Peterson's theory is tight, well-reasoned and more correct than it is incorrect.

A terrific thought-provoking work. I am not sure that its key points are valid, but the work gets one to thinking about the limits of cities' power. The central point is pretty simple. Taxpayers will do a cost-benefit analysis of how their tax dollars are being used. If they see benefits to themselves of how their tax dollars are employed, they will stay. If they do not approve, they will vote with their feet and leave, thus reducing the community's tax base. The effect on local communities? They'll want to keep their tax base as happy as they can. One implication? No redistributive policy, where the taxes of those who make up the major part of the tax base are used to assist those who have few resources. On the other hand, the tax base would be quite pleased to see their taxes used for purposes that they believe would benefit them. In the end, cities' power is "limited" by the desire to please the tax base. Actual data for this thesis are somewhat mixed. Again, though, a very thought-provoking work. . . .

I read this book while an undergraduate when I took a course in urban politics. Without doubt, it is the worst "academic" book I have ever read. Prof. Peterson's writing is brutally hard to follow. Granted, the topic is quite dry, but the author's writing makes it even worse. When I was finished, I

had learned absolutely nothing, having wasted many hours of my life I shall never get back. Prof. Peterson would do well to learn from colleagues Lowi and Shefter how to write on dry topics with some panache.

Exceptional analysis of city limits

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