Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the House of Representatives by Gary W. Cox; Mathew D. McCubbins

Review by: Jeffery A. Jenkins


Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Southern Political Science Association

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4639900

Accessed: 14/12/2011 09:25
important questions to be tackled by future research. First of all, to what extent and under what circumstances are religiously-based lobbying groups important players in state politics and successful at obtaining their desired legislative outcomes? Each of the essays in the volume takes up this question to one extent or another, and several essays effectively tackle this question by drawing on data that compare the financial wherewithal of religious groups to non-religious political action committees, or by drawing on surveys of state legislators that gauge their impressions of the most effective lobbying groups active in the states. But other essays—no doubt due to the dearth of available data—rely on the leaders of religious interest groups to gauge their own success, or simply equate legislative outcomes with the success or effectiveness (or the failure or ineffectiveness, as the case may be) of groups advocating a position on the issue at hand.

Another important question involves religious groups’ role in setting the legislative and political agendas at the state level. While certain essays discuss the proactive agenda-setting efforts of religious groups, others restrict their focus to analyzing the ways in which religious groups are often forced to be reactive in responding to the political agendas that have presumably been set by others. This topic is particularly important and worthy of further investigation in light of the finding reported here that, in many—though not all—cases, religiously-based interest groups do not oppose each other. As den Dulk and Hertzke summarize in the conclusion, “in most cases the work of the ‘social justice’ (religious) coalition does not come into direct conflict with the ‘social regulatory’ (religious) coalition. The liberal coalition’s focus on hunger, nutrition, health care, corrections, welfare, and environment is not opposed by conservative groups, just mostly ignored. The liberal coalition, in turn, does not directly oppose the conservative agenda on abortion and gay marriage” (233). But is this truly a sign of a general lack of conflict between religious groups? Or might there be real conflict among religious interests, albeit restricted to competing to define the political and legislative agenda?

In short, this collection of essays makes a significant contribution to the scholarly literature concerned with the role of religion in American politics. It will prove highly useful to scholars of religion and politics, as well as to those concerned with interest group politics more generally.

Gregory A. Smith,
Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life


Setting the Agenda is a follow-up to the authors’ 1993 book, Legislative Leviathan, which advanced a theory of U.S. political parties as “procedural cartels,” or strategic teams, that use structures and rule-making to organize the House of Representatives for the benefit of their members. Legislative Leviathan had a profound impact on the field of congressional studies, and legislative studies more generally, by reviving the study of political parties in Congress as well as generating work, mainly by Keith Krehbiel, that would question the importance of congressional parties as useful analytic units. Indeed, the “parties versus preferences” debate, launched to a large degree by Legislative Leviathan, has been the centerpiece of congressional studies for the past decade.

In Setting the Agenda, Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins continue to build and refine their procedural cartel theory. In many ways, this book exemplifies the authors’ continually evolving thinking as it relates to parties. Legislative Leviathan established the initial theoretical framework; Setting the Agenda represents a mature sequel, in which Cox and McCubbins tighten the theory and highlight those aspects that are of particular importance. Specifically, the authors identify two ways in which the majority party in Congress can wield influence: negative agenda power, in which issues opposed by a majority of the majority party are kept off the agenda; and positive agenda power, whereby issues supported by a majority of the majority party are actively pushed on the House floor. While the parties literature focuses almost exclusively on positive agenda power, and thus searches for evidence of party leaders’ attempts to pressure or “strongarm” members on roll-call votes, Cox and McCubbins consider negative agenda power to be the “bedrock” of party government. That is, the ability to block issues that would split the majority constitutes the main influence of congressional parties. Thus, according to the authors, the bulk of party influence occurs at the pre-floor stage, an area often ignored by researchers.

To make their case, Cox and McCubbins introduce a new measure to gauge party influence: the roll rate. A party is considered to be “rolled” on the House floor if a majority of its members unsuccessfully oppose the passage of a bill. A party’s roll rate in a given Congress is then the proportion of final-passage
votes that result in party rolls. If negative agenda power is indeed a meaningful force in Congress, the majority party should be rolled very infrequently across congressional history while the minority party should be rolled considerably more often. This is because the majority party “cartelizes” the positions in the House that possess agenda-setting authority, including all major committee and subcommittee chairs, a majority of seats on the Rules Committee, and the Speakership, upon the chamber’s organization. As a result, multiple “veto points” are distributed throughout the majority party, which insures that issues that have the potential to split the majority will not end up on the House floor, as multiple veto players are required to sign off on any bill. Since the minority party does not possess a similar set of vetoes, it has no ability to block issues and thus is always susceptible to being rolled.

The argument is persuasive and the empirics are convincing. Cox and McCubbins find that the majority party has been rolled on only 2.5 percent of final-passage votes since the end of Reconstruction, while the minority party’s roll rate was 27.7 percent on the same bills over the same time span. Moreover, roughly half of the majority party rolls in the contemporary era were “inconsequential,” as the bills in question would fail to become laws, thanks to defeat in the Senate or veto by the President. These results strongly support the authors’ argument for negative agenda power, especially as it relates to the majority party’s privileged organizational position in the House. Additional research shows that the majority party’s iron-fisted control of the agenda originated in the late nineteenth century with the Reed Rules and extends into other decision-making domains, such as rules votes and bills reported from committee. Finally, Cox and McCubbins pit their cartel model head-to-head with a basic majoritarian model—in which the median member of the House sets the agenda—and find that the cartel model is the superior performer across a variety of bill-mapping scenarios.

Is Setting the Agenda the last word on research investigating party influence in Congress? No, and Cox and McCubbins identify fairly clearly where they believe the next frontiers are located. First, by focusing on negative agenda power, Setting the Agenda leaves open the question of how important positive agenda power is in Congress. The authors devote one chapter to the examination of positive agenda power in the House and report some interesting initial results, but leave it up to other researchers to blaze this trail. Second, Cox and McCubbins are clear in their belief that their procedural cartel theory, defined in terms of negative agenda power, is generalizable beyond the U.S. Congress. The authors have done some preliminary work on both the U.S. Senate and various comparative legislatures—and uncovered results consistent with cartel theory—but a wealth of opportunities remains for productive research. A more elaborate comparative focus appears to be their next research project.

In short, Setting the Agenda is a significant and successful follow-up to Legislative Leviathan. Cox and McCubbins have continued to flesh out their procedural cartel theory, shifting the focus of the party-influence debate from the floor stage, when parties are voting coalitions and party leaders “pressure” members to support party issues, to the pre-floor stage, at which parties are agenda setters that use their veto powers to prevent issues that would harm the majority party from reaching the floor. As a result, Setting the Agenda will become a critical addition to every graduate Congress (and Legislatures) course in short order, and it will influence party-related research on Congress (and Legislatures) for years to come.

Jeffery A. Jenkins, Northwestern University

The Intellectuals and the Flag. By Todd Gitlin. (Columbia University Press, 2006.)

Todd Gitlin has written a number of fine books over the past two decades, among them The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage and The Twilight of Common Dreams, as well as occasional pieces in the New York Times Book Review, Mother Jones, Harper’s and elsewhere. His writing is always intelligent and engaging, often eloquent, occasionally brilliant. But perhaps his most memorable work remains a series of short essays that have never, technically speaking, appeared in print.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, Gitlin wrote a string of commentaries combining first-hand accounts of living about a mile downwind of Ground Zero with incisive analyses of the responses to the attacks by politicians and other public figures. The essays were posted on the open Democracy website, the first within 24 hours of the Twin Towers’ collapse. Gitlin’s dispatches from the front quickly made the rounds on the Internet, circulating via listservs and forwarded e-mails. For many of us, they were a bracing antidote for that “pervasive abuse of language in play from Washington officials,” as he put it, and the “overwrought metaphors” endlessly circulated and amplified through the media.