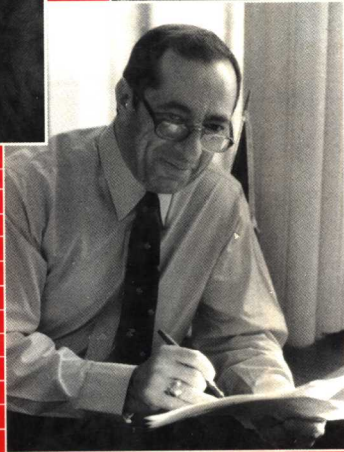


Seventh Edition

STATE AND LOCAL POLITICS

Government by the People



James MacGregor Burns / J. W. Pelt
Thomas E. Cronin / David B. Mag

seventh edition

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Government By The People

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Preface

This book is about the political forces that shape policy making and policy outcomes in state and local communities. To those of us who are students of American politics, states and their 87,000 subdivisions are fascinating political laboratories that allow comparisons among different political systems. State and community governments pose certain problems more sharply than others. The party system is much weaker in some regions of the country than in others. State legislatures in some of the smaller or rural states meet for just a few months a year, whereas in other states they meet all year. The importance of interest groups and the media varies from state to state and from city to city. Generalizations are sometimes difficult, yet we try in this book to summarize what political scientists know about state and local politics.

States and cities are struggling in the 1990s. Our governance arrangements are being tested as they have rarely been in the past. Those who want better government in their communities and states will not achieve it by sitting around and waiting for it. If government by the people, of the people, and for the people is to be more than just rhetoric, activists must understand state and local politics and must be willing to clarify the issues for debate, form political alliances, respect and protect the rights of those with whom they differ, and be willing to serve as citizen leaders, citizen politicians. We hope this book will motivate students to the view that every person *can* make a difference, and that all of us should work toward that end.

This book consists of the last nine chapters plus the chapter on federalism from the fifteenth edition of *Government By The People*, National, State and Local Version (1993). We have had the benefit of useful criticisms and suggestions from Professors Thad Beyle, University of North Carolina, and Roy E.

Thoman, West Texas State University. We also wish to express our sincere thanks to our production editor at Prentice Hall, Serena Hoffman.

We would be pleased to hear from our readers with any reactions or suggestions. Write to us at our college addresses or in care of the Political Science Editor, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Thanks.

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State and Local Politics: Who Governs?

State and local governments flourished before the U.S. government was even dreamed about. Indeed, the framers of the U.S. Constitution shaped the national government largely according to their practical experience with state, village, or community governments. Today this is still true. What happens in the 87,000 state and local governments continues to influence the forms and policies of the national government. The reverse, of course, is also true: The national government and its policies have an important impact on local and state government.

The national government's activities—dramatic diplomatic maneuvers, key Supreme Court decisions, major congressional debates—receive most of the publicity, so we often overlook the countless ways governments closer to home affect our lives. The quality of the air we breathe, the purity of the water we drink, the character of our schools and universities, the effectiveness of law enforcement, and decisions about how we will pay for all these things—these are just a few examples of policies determined by state and community governments.

"Who really runs things around here?" "Who has the clout?" "Who counts?" "Who is left behind?" These are important questions, especially for a nation that is committed to the idea of a government by the people and for the people.

In 1924 two sociologists from Columbia University, Robert and Helen Lynd, studied a typical American city as though they were anthropologists investigating a tribe in Africa. For two years they lived in Muncie, Indiana—at the time a city of 38,000—asking questions and watching how people made their living, brought up their children, used their leisure time, and joined in

civic and social associations. The Lynds reported that despite the appearance of democratic rule, a social and economic elite actually ran things.¹ Their work stimulated a series of studies by social scientists and journalists in all kinds of communities to find out how government works and whether power is concentrated in the hands of the few, dispersed among the many, or somewhere in between.

Studying American state and local governments to find out how they operate and who governs them in the 1990s presents major problems. It is one thing to study the national system, vast and complex as it is; it is something else to study 50 separate state governments, each with its own legislature, executive, and judiciary, each with its own intricate politics and political traditions. Moreover, the state and local governments are only part of a much larger picture. To discuss the government of Mississippi or of the city of Detroit without mentioning white-black relations, the government of New York City or of Los Angeles without noting the politics of ethnic groups, or the government of Texas without referring to cattle and oil would be to ignore the real dynamics of the political process. State and local governments, just like the national government, cannot be properly analyzed and assessed as organizational charts. They are systems of politics and people. And the great variations among the states and localities—in population, economic resources, environment—make comparisons and generalizations difficult.

Every government system is part of a larger social system. A government is a structure and a process that resolves, or at least manages, conflicts. Further, it regulates, distributes, and sometimes redistributes items like income and property. It is also a device to achieve certain goals and to perform services desired both by those who govern and by those who are governed. Many outside factors are often more important than the structure of the government system itself or even the nature of its political processes. The economic system, the class structure, and the style of life are sometimes more important in determining the policies adopted by a particular state or municipality than are the government structures it has adopted.² Obviously, the economic circumstances and objectives of a city influence what is discussed and often what is decided.³ However, the interrelations among the economic, social, and political systems are so complex that it is often difficult to unscramble them and to decide which is cause and which is effect.

This already complex picture is complicated still further by the fact that more than 87,000 cities, counties, towns, villages, school districts, water-control districts, and other governmental units are piled one on top of another within the states. If all states or cities or towns were alike, the task might be manageable. But of course they are not. Each city, like each state, is unique. Our states, cities, and counties do not fit into simple categories; we must discover the patterns and search for the uniformities underlying all the variation before we can begin to understand how these governments operate, who most influences their operations and policies, who benefits, and who pays.

The Location of Power

How can we grasp the operations and problems of state and local government without becoming bogged down in endless detail? We can do so by calling attention to the core problems of democratic governance: citizen participation, liberty, constitutional checks and balances, representation, and responsible leadership. Further, we can emphasize a question that throws light on all these problems: *Who governs?* Does political power in the states and localities tend to gravitate toward a relatively small number of people? If so, who are these people? Do they work closely together, or do they divide among themselves? Do the same people or factions shape the agenda for public debate and dominate all decision making, or do some sets of leaders decide certain questions and leave other questions to other leaders or simply to chance?

ANALYZING PATTERNS OF POWER

Relying on a mix of research methods, social scientists have studied the patterns of power in communities and have come up with varied findings. Floyd Hunter, a sociologist who analyzed Atlanta in the 1950s, found a relatively small and stable group of top policy makers drawn largely from the business class. This elite operated through shifting groups of secondary leaders who sometimes modified policy, but the power of the elite was almost always important.⁴ In contrast, Robert Dahl, a political scientist at Yale, studied New Haven at the same time and concluded that although some people had a great deal of influence and most others had little, there was no permanent hard-core elite. There were, instead, shifting coalitions of leaders who sometimes disagreed among themselves and who always had to keep in mind what the public would accept when making their decisions.⁵

Of the two cities, Atlanta and New Haven, which is more typical of the distribution of influence in American communities? Or could it be that the differences between Hunter's and Dahl's findings stem from the questions they asked? Clearly, the assumptions of investigators and the techniques they use produce some of the differences in what they find.⁶

RULE BY A FEW OR RULE BY THE MANY?

One group of investigators, chiefly sociologists such as Hunter, have been mainly concerned with **social stratification** in the political system; in other words, how politics is affected by the fact that in any community, people are divided among socioeconomic groups. Are the upper classes the ruling classes? These social scientists, assuming that political influence is a function of the socioeconomic structure of the community, try to find out who governs a particular community by asking a variety of citizens to identify the persons who are

most influential in it. Then they study these influential people to determine their social characteristics, their roles in decision making, and the interrelations among themselves and between them and the rest of the citizens. Those who use this technique report that the upper socioeconomic groups make up the power elite, that elected political leaders are subordinate to this elite, and that the major conflicts within the community are between the upper and the lower socioeconomic classes.

Another group of investigators questioned these findings, raising objections to the research techniques used. The evidence, they contend (even that contained within the stratification studies themselves), does not support the conclusion that communities are run by a power elite. Rather, the notion of a power elite is merely a reflection of the techniques used and the assumptions made by the stratification theorists. Instead of studying the activities of those who are *thought* to have "clout," one should study public policy to find out how, in fact, decisions are made. Those who conduct community studies in this manner usually find a relatively open pluralistic power structure. Some people do have more influence than others, but influence is shared among a rather sizable number of people and tends to be limited to particular issues and areas. Those who have much to say about how the public schools are run may have little influence over economic policies. And in many communities and for many issues there is no identifiable group of influential people. Policy emerges not from the actions of a small group, but rather from the unplanned and unanticipated consequences of the behavior of a relatively large number of people, and especially from the countless contending groups that form and win access to those who make important decisions. According to these theorists, the social structure of the community is certainly one factor, but it is not the determining factor in how goods and services are distributed.

Here we have an example of how the questions we ask influence the answers we find. If we ask highly visible and actively involved citizens for their opinions of who is powerful, we will find they name a relatively small number of people as the "real" holders of power. But if we study dozens of local events and decisions, we frequently find that a variety of people are involved—different people in different policy areas. Still other students of local politics suggest that local values, traditions, and the structure of governmental organizations determine which issues get on the local agenda.⁷ Thus tobacco, mining, or steel interests, they say, are so dominant in an area that tax, regulation, or job safety policies normal elsewhere will be kept off the local policy agenda for fear of offending the "powers that be." And those interests may indeed go to great lengths to prevent what they deem to be adverse policies. Such students of local politics urge us to weigh carefully the possibility that defenders of the status quo can mobilize power resources in such a way that "nondecisions" may be more important than actual decisions. In effect, they tell us to study who rules, but also study the procedures and rules of the game that operate to *prevent* issues from arising. Determine which groups or interests would gain and which would be handicapped by political decisions.⁸ This is useful advice, although

the task of studying nondecisions or nonevents is sometimes impossibly complex.⁹

Studies of communities and states have now produced enough findings that we can begin to see how formal government institutions, social structure, economic factors, and other variables interact to create a working political system.

The Stakes in the Political Struggle

Events have given the national government enormous influence over the destiny of the American people. By assuming the responsibility for protecting our civil rights, fighting inflation and unemployment, regulating great economic power groups such as airlines and drug companies, and subsidizing weaker sectors of the economy, not to mention war and peace matters, the national government has become the custodian of the nation's economic strength and security. Certainly, state and local governments cannot claim so central a role. Yet the role of the states and localities is increasingly large in domestic policy questions, not only in absolute terms, but even in relative terms compared with the national government. Since World War II state and local government activities have increased much faster than the nondefense activities of the federal government. Today two-thirds of the expenditures for domestic functions are made by the states and their subdivisions. And states have had to assume even greater responsibilities for raising taxes and setting economic and social priorities as a result of the significant cutbacks in federal funds to the states and cities in the Reagan and Bush years. For example, federal mandates force states to raise taxes to pay for programs like Medicaid. Moreover, while the national government retains overall regulatory and enforcement authority over environmental policy, the responsibility for implementation and for paying for a cleaner environment has increasingly fallen to states and localities.

Moreover, state and local governments have more intimate relations with the average person than the national government does, for neighborhood, school, and housing problems are closely regulated by state and local governments. The points at which we come into contact with government services and officials most often are in schools, on the highways, in playgrounds, at big fires, in hospitals, in courtrooms. (But even in many of these areas, the mix of national, state, and local programs and responsibilities is such that it is often hard to isolate which level of government does what to whom. Also, there are some national-to-individual relationships that bypass state and local governments altogether, such as the mail service and social security.)

Some areas of life might seem far removed from any government—for example, having a dog or a cat as a pet. But a dog needs a license and a collar, it must be confined, and it must be inoculated. And if anyone thinks that cats are beyond the reach of the law, one should remember Adlai E. Stevenson's famous veto of the "cat bill" when he was governor of Illinois. The bill would have im-

posed fines on cat owners who let their pets run off their premises, and it would have allowed cat haters to trap them. The governor said:

I cannot agree that it should be declared public policy of Illinois that a cat visiting a neighbor's yard or crossing the highway is a public nuisance. It is in the nature of cats to do a certain amount of unescorted roaming. . . . I am afraid this bill could only create discord, recrimination, and enmity. . . . We are all interested in protecting certain varieties of birds. . . . The problem of the cat versus bird is as old as time. If we attempt to resolve it by legislation, who knows but what we may be called upon to take sides as well in the age-old problem of dog versus cat, bird versus bird, or even bird versus worm. . . .¹⁰

So the governor sided with cat supporters over bird lovers, while staying neutral between bird lovers and worm diggers. Such incidents illustrate how the complex workings of modern society can lead to government intervention in or overregulation of our lives.

THE MAZE OF INTERESTS

Special interest groups are found, in varying forms, in every state and locality. Even industrial Rhode Island has farm organizations, and rural Wyoming has trade unions. Influential economic pressure groups and political action committees (organized to raise and disperse campaign funds to candidates for public office) operate in the states much as they do nationally. They try to build up the membership of their organizations; they lobby at the state capitols and at city halls; they educate and organize the voters; and they support their political friends in office and oppose their enemies. They also face the internal problems all groups face: maintaining unity within the group, dealing with subgroups that break off in response to special needs, and maintaining both democracy and discipline.

One great difference, however, is that group interests can be concentrated in states and localities, whereas their strength tends to be diluted in the national government. Big business does not really run things in Washington, any more than Wall Street, the Catholic Church, or the American Legion do. But in some states and localities certain interests are clearly dominant because they represent the social and economic majorities of the area. Few politicians in Wisconsin will attack dairy farmers; candidates for office in Florida are unlikely to oppose benefits for senior citizens; and few African-American officeholders in Boston are likely to espouse strong Republican positions.

It is the range and variety of these local groupings that give American politics its special flavor and excitement. Such groups include auto unions and manufacturers in Michigan, corn and hog farmers in Iowa, French Americans in northern New England, gas and oil dealers in Texas, gun owners in New Hampshire and Idaho, tobacco farmers in North Carolina, poultry growers in Arkansas, aircraft employees in southern California, cotton growers in the