
PERPETUATING THE PORK BARREL

POLICY SUBSYSTEMS AND
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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PERPETUATING THE PORK BARREL

Policy subsystems and American democracy

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This book details the policy subsystems – links among members of Congress, interest groups, program beneficiaries, and federal and subnational government agencies – that blanket the American political landscape. Robert Stein and Kenneth Bickers have constructed a new data base detailing federal outlays to congressional districts for each federal program, and use it to examine four myths about the impact of policy subsystems on American government and democratic practice. These include the myth that policy subsystems are a major contributor to the federal deficit; that, once created, federal programs grow inexorably and rarely die; that, to garner support for their programs, subsystem actors seek to universalize the geographic scope of program benefits; and that the flow of program benefits to constituencies in congressional districts ensures the reelection of legislators. The authors conclude with an appraisal of proposals for reforming the American political system, including a balanced budget amendment, a presidential line-item veto, term limitations, campaign finance reform, and the reorganization of congressional committees.

PERPETUATING THE PORK BARREL

For
Edward Stein, 1912-1994,
and
Thomas and Nancy Bickers

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As always, responsibility for remaining errors and oversights is ours.

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PART I

Policy subsystems and the pork barrel

On November 3, 1992, Mike Andrews, Democrat from Houston, Texas, was reelected to his sixth term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Andrews received only 54.5 percent of the vote in defeating Dolly Madison McKenna, a candidate who had never run for elective office. Previously, Congressman Andrews had breezed through his reelection bids. In 1986 he was unopposed; in 1988 he won with 71 percent of the vote; and in 1990 he received 65 percent of the vote. His 1992 reelection bid demonstrated that he had become vulnerable. Something needed to be done to shore up his support in the district. A week later his administrative assistant approached him about shifting staff resources to his district office in Houston. The plan that he and his staff devised was to focus their efforts on bringing more federal spending into his district. They would aggressively seek federal grant awards for his constituents. The idea was to link the congressman to good things that were coming into the district. Grant awards would make him more familiar and valuable to his constituents. Not coincidentally, new grant awards would also provide him with the opportunity to garner positive media coverage. The efficacy of this strategy was not tested by Congressman Andrews, however, as he gave up his House seat in 1994 for a primary bid for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Whether the procurement of new grant awards would have bought Congressman Andrews a larger electoral margin is a moot question, but it is a time-honored strategy among his colleagues in the U.S. Congress.¹

During the debate over President Clinton's first budget proposal, Phil Boyer, president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), sent a letter to the 300,000 members of AOPA alerting them to the administration's proposed cutbacks in funding for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Letters of this sort are common between interest groups and their members. What made this letter particularly interesting was that included with it was a copy of a supposedly confidential memorandum from Joseph Del Balzo, the head of the FAA, to the secretary of transporta-

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tion. The memo outlined a number of options for how the FAA might meet the \$600 million in cutbacks that the administration had instructed it to prune from its budget request for fiscal year 1995. In his memo, Del Balzo emphasized how each of the options would seriously compromise the operational services of the FAA, including air traffic control and weather information services provided to pilots and their passengers, as well as the construction and maintenance of airport and air traffic facilities. It is no accident that this memo was leaked to an interest group that would share the FAA's concerns and would be quick to mobilize its members to fend off the Clinton administration's budgetary proposal. In Boyer's words, the president's requirement that the FAA cut its budget was "way out of line. You and I know it. The FAA knows it. Now, we have to make sure Congress and the President know it."²

These two anecdotes illustrate basic features of American politics – the utilization of domestic spending programs to address the needs of specific constituency groups, legislators seeking to use domestic programs to bolster their electoral fortunes, interest groups working in concert with bureaucrats to influence elected officials, the demands on policy makers to support individual policy objectives despite the need to reduce federal spending in the aggregate. These anecdotes are suggestive of the myriad roles pork barrel spending plays in the day-to-day operation of policy subsystems within the American political system.

Policy subsystems are networks of relationships among different actors, all of whom have a stake in a policy arena. At the heart of most policy subsystems is a set of government programs. Our argument is that these programs are bundled together in nonrandom ways that are intended to address the heterogeneous preferences of the diverse actors in the subsystem. These bundles of programs, which we call program portfolios, provide opportunities for subsystem actors to pursue their own interests but, at the same time, force them to engage in some degree of cooperative behavior with one another. Around each portfolio is a distinct set of actors who use the portfolio to promote their individual and organizational goals.

Policy subsystems have a curious status in studies of U.S. politics. When viewed as iron triangles, they are both despised and dismissed. They are despised for their insularity from accountability and democratic control. They are dismissed as being no longer able to resist the pressures of myriad interest claimants and irrelevant to an understanding of the modern policy process. When viewed as issue networks, policy subsystems are both applauded for their openness and derided for the ease with which special interests are able to press their agendas on policy makers.

This book examines policy subsystems as they have developed and