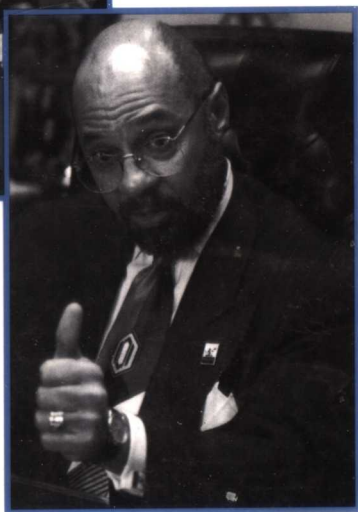


# STATE AND LOCAL POLITICS

GOVERNMENT  
BY THE PEOPLE

NINTH EDITION



BURNS  
PELTASON  
CRONIN  
MAGLEBY

2 9th edition

# *State and Local Politics*

## **GOVERNMENT BY THE PEOPLE**

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# *Preface*

In 1996 President Clinton signed into law a welfare reform bill enacted by the Republican-controlled Congress. One important consequence of this law was to expand the role of state governments. The laboratories for the 1996 welfare reform were state governments, which had long called for fewer mandates from Washington and greater latitude to experiment with new ideas. As the agenda of American politics now shifts to domestic issues, debates over the role of national, state, and local governments are taking place.

State and local politics took on great significance following the dramatic 1994 and 1996 elections. By winning control over both houses of Congress and also making gains in governorships and state legislatures, the Republicans were able to assert greater control over the agenda of American politics, leaving Bill Clinton and the Democrats on the defensive. However, Clinton and the Republican Congress were able to find a middle ground in 1996 and 1997 as they passed legislation that included welfare reform, tax reform, and an agreement to balance the federal budget.

A major part of the new agenda for national policy involves changing the relationship between the national and state and local governments. State governments helped foster this transition. Governors led the fight to enact a bill that required the federal government to allocate resources sufficient to pay for its mandates upon state and local governments. The states also pressed their case to Congress for a redefinition of the relationship between federal and state governments.

Courts remain important in adjudicating the federal/state relationship, as well as state-to-state issues. One of the most visible policy proposals to originate in the states—congressional term limits—was declared unconstitutional, but term limits for state officials were allowed to remain.

At the same time that changes in our national government highlighted and expanded the role of states, state governments were often setting the agenda of national politics. Ballot initiatives in California on illegal immigration (1994) and affirmative action (1996) spawned national debates on these topics. State

experiments in health care, welfare, education, taxing, and spending provided an important laboratory for policy experimentation. To understand American politics in the 1990s requires an appreciation of the important policy-making role played by state and local governments.

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 nearly 87,000 subdivisions are fascinating political laboratories that allow comparisons about different political systems. State and community governments face a great variety of problems. The party system is much weaker in some regions than others. State legislatures in some of the smaller or rural states meet for just a few months a year, whereas in other states they are in session all year long. The influence 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.

This book consists of the last nine chapters plus the chapter on federalism from the seventeenth edition of *Government By The People: National, State, and Local Version* (1998). We were assisted in the task of updating and revising this edition by Elizabeth Schiller at the University of California, Irvine; JoAnn Collins, Donna Jones, Adrienne Ralph, and Ken Singer at Whitman College; and Jason R. Beal, Hilarie H. Robison, Jeremy Pope, Derall Riley, and Eric A. Smith at Brigham Young University. We benefitted from the comments and suggestions of our colleagues Thad Beyle, University of North Carolina; Gary Bryner, Brigham Young University; Gary Cornia, Brigham Young University; Janet M. Kelly, Clemson University; Alan Rosenthal, Rutgers University; Richard Smolka, American University; and Joseph F. Zimmerman, SUNY at Albany. We especially want 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 at Prentice Hall, 1 Lake Street, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458. Thanks.

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# *State and Local Politics: Who Governs?*

*W*ho paves your roads, runs your schools, shapes welfare policy, decides who goes to prison or is put on probation, and levies your property and sales taxes? Voters in our states and localities and their elected and appointed officials determine most of these public policies. Many of the most critical domestic and economic issues facing the United States today must be decided at the state and local level of government. But nearly 30 percent of our major cities, including Miami and Washington, D.C., are currently in serious financial distress.<sup>1</sup> And as welfare programs become decentralized from the federal government to the states, it is state and local governments that will have to oversee the hoped-for transition from welfare to work. Ninety-five percent of the more than a million and a half people in prisons or jails are in state and local facilities, not federal prisons. Another major challenge—how to bring the residents of the inner city in our large metropolitan areas into the economic mainstream—can only be solved by imaginative leadership and thoughtful public policy making at the state and local levels of government as well as in Washington.

State and local governments flourished on this continent before a government of the United States was even conceptualized. Indeed, the framers of our Constitution shaped the national government largely according to their practical experience with colonial and community governments. What happens today in our 85,000 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.<sup>2</sup>

The national government's activities—dramatic military or diplomatic maneuvers, key Supreme Court decisions, major congressional debates and investigations—receive such great publicity that we often overlook the countless ways governments closer to home affect our lives. Strategies for zoning and local economic development, the quality of our schools and universities, the effectiveness of law enforcement and fire protection, and the decisions about how we pay for all these things are determined by state and community governments.

## 2 State and Local Politics: Who Governs?

Are some forms of local and state government more effective than others? How different are states and communities in their policies? Are some of these governments more responsive to citizens than others? Why? These are important questions, especially for a nation that is committed to the idea of a government by and for the people.

### THE LOCATION OF POWER

In 1924 two sociologists from Columbia University, Robert Lynd 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 residents—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.<sup>3</sup> Their work stimulated studies by social scientists and journalists in all kinds of communities to find out whether power is concentrated in the hands of the few, dispersed among the many, or somewhere in between.

But studying state and local governments to find out how they operate and who governs them presents major problems. It is one thing to study our 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, state and local governments are only part of a much larger picture. To discuss the government of the state of Mississippi or of the city of Detroit without mentioning race, 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 the cattle and oil industries 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 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. Outside factors like economic system, class structure, and lifestyle are often more important than the structure of the government itself or even the nature of its political processes. Obviously, the economic circumstances and objectives of a city influence what is discussed and often what is decided. However, the interrelations among the economic, social, and political systems are so complex it is often difficult to unscramble them and to decide which is cause and which is effect.<sup>4</sup>

This already complex picture is complicated still further by the fact that more than 85,000 cities, counties, towns, villages, school districts, water-control dis-

tricts, 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, has distinct characteristics. Our states, cities, and counties do not fit into simple categories; we must discover the patterns and search for the uniformities underlying all the variations before we can begin to understand how these governments operate, who most influences their operations and policies, who benefits, and who pays.<sup>5</sup>

### Analyzing Patterns 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?

Relying on a mix of research methods, social scientists have studied 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.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Robert Dahl, a political scientist at Yale, and two of his graduate students studied New Haven at that 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 decisions.<sup>7</sup>

Of the two cities, Atlanta and New Haven, which is more typical of the distribution of influence in American communities today? Or could it be that the differences between Hunter's and Dahl's findings stem from the questions they asked or the people they talked to? Clearly, the assumptions of investigators and the techniques they use produce some of the differences in what they find.<sup>8</sup>

### Rule By a Few or Rule By the Many?

One group of investigators, chiefly sociologists such as Hunter, have been concerned with **social stratification** in the political system—in other words, how politics is affected by divisions among socioeconomic groups or classes in a community. These social scientists assume that political influence is a function of social stratification, and they try to find out who governs a particular community by asking various citizens to identify the persons who are most influential. 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 question these findings, raising objections to the research techniques used. They contend the evidence contained in the stratification studies 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 stratification theorists. Instead of studying the activities of those who are thought to have "clout," these researchers insist one should study public policy to find out how decisions are made.

Those who conduct community studies by analyzing the making of decisions usually find a relatively open, pluralistic power structure in which some people do have more influence than others, but influence is shared among a sizable number of people and tends to be limited to particular issues and areas. For example, 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 the 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 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 find that a variety of people are involved—different people in different policy areas.

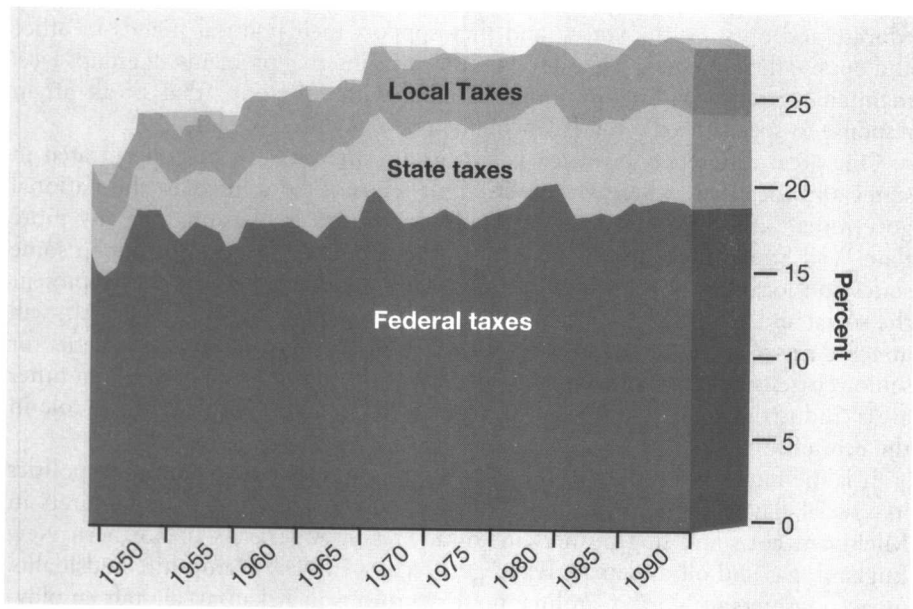
Other students of local politics suggest that local values, traditions, and the structure of governmental organizations determine which issues get on the local agenda.<sup>9</sup> Thus tobacco, mining, or steel interests, they find, are so dominant in some areas that tax, regulation, or job safety policies that are normal elsewhere will be kept off the local policy agenda for fear of offending the "powers that be." And those "powers" may indeed go to great lengths to prevent what they deem to be adverse policies. This type of approach alerts 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, these researchers tell us to study who rules, but also to study the procedures and rules of the game that operate to prevent some issues from arising. They urge us to determine which groups or interests would gain and which would be handicapped by political decisions.<sup>10</sup> This is useful advice, although the task of studying nondecisions or nonevents is sometimes impossibly complex.<sup>11</sup>

Studies of states and communities 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

Past events have given the national government enormous influence over the destiny of the American people. The national government has become the driving force behind the nation's economic strength and security. It assumes major responsibility for protecting civil rights, fighting inflation and unemployment, regulating sectors with great economic power such as airlines and drug companies, and subsidizing weaker sectors of the economy—not to mention war and peace matters. Certainly, state and local governments cannot claim so central a role. Yet the role of states and localities is increasing in domestic policy questions, not only in absolute terms but even in financial terms compared with the national government (see Figure 1-1).

In the half century or more since World War II, state and local government activities have increased much faster than the nondefense activities of the federal government. As we end the twentieth century, the federal government is downsizing while the states and local governments are generally growing. Five times as many people work for state and local governments as compared to federal civilian employees: 16



**FIGURE 1-1 Total Taxes Collected as a Percentage of the GDP**

SOURCE: *The New York Times*, April 10, 1994, Section 4, p. 1. Copyright © 1994 by The New York Times Co. Reprinted by permission.



## 6 State and Local Politics: Who Governs?

million state and local employees and less than 3 million federal civil servants.<sup>12</sup> And states have had to assume even greater responsibilities for raising taxes, setting economic and social priorities, and administering most welfare and job creation programs as a result of the significant cutbacks in federal funds or devolution of responsibilities to the states during the past twenty years.

Moreover, state and local governments deal more directly with the average person than the national government does, because neighborhood, school, and housing problems are closely regulated by state and local governments. The points at which people come into contact with government services and officials most often concern schools, streets and highways, parks and playgrounds, police and fire protection, zoning, and health care. But even in 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 Internal Revenue Service, Postal Service, and Social Security.

### The Maze of Interests

Special interest groups can be found in varying forms in every state and locality. For example, industrial Rhode Island has farm organizations, and rural Wyoming has trade unions. Influential economic pressure groups and **political action committees** (organized to raise and disburse 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 capitals 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 same internal problems all groups face: maintaining unity within the group, dealing with subgroups that break off in response to special needs, and balancing democracy with 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; few candidates for office in Florida will oppose benefits for senior citizens; and few officeholders in Idaho will support gun control. In other areas, industries such as timber or energy are influential because of their role in the economy.

It is the range and variety of these local groupings that gives American politics its special flavor, excitement, and challenge: 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 South, coal miners in West Virginia, and sheep ranchers in Utah. However, the power of these groups should not be exaggerated.