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POLICY APPROACH TO POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: LESSONS FROM THE FOUR CORNERS STATES

By HELEN M. INGRAM, NANCY K. LANEY and JOHN R. McCAIN
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. 1980. Pp. 270. \$22.00.

Can state legislatures claim the right to decide the balance between economic development and the preservation of landscape and lifestyle in the Southwest? Can state legislatures carry the burdens of rapid resource exploitation and of reallocating the West's scarce and precious water and scenery? What claim can legislators make to be representative? This book attempts some answers, by surveying and comparing the opinions of voters and state senators in 1975-76.

The legislatures of the Four Corners states have "an undistinguished reputation for making significant policy or responding to voters" (p. 2). But, the study concludes, these legislatures do in fact effectively represent their constituents—even in such complex questions as energy and environment. Past skepticism about legislative bodies has been fed by research, too narrowly conceived, showing that large numbers of voters disagree with their representatives or do not understand issues. Of course this is so. Voters hardly can be expected to be even as knowledgeable as their representatives, and representatives don't have homogenous constituencies. This study argues that representation should be tested otherwise, by comparing the state and the state legislature as wholes, and by making comparisons of opinions about clusters of related issues rather than of individual votes.

The study's strongest measures are of the congruence of senators' attitudes with voters' opinion. The analysis is weaker in measuring the legitimacy which a legislative body earns through leadership. But still the book offers insights to both these aspects of representation, by showing how representation differs according to the emotion and complexity of various issue clusters.

Senators are particularly likely to conform to voter opinion on redistributive issues (ERA, welfare spending, etc.) evoking emotional public response, but on the technically complex issues of water allocations, senators' attitudes are more rational than voters'. Voters favor more water for everyone, irrespective of the physical reality of scarcity. Senators better understand the necessity of priorities and reflect economics and equity in setting them. Not so comforting is the conclusion that the legislatures have also found an easy path of symbolic resolutions, leaving major action to the federal government.

“[L]egislatures have a strong incentive to defer (allocation) decisions to negotiations among user groups or another level of government, so as not to take the blame for unpopular policy” (p. 187).

Other differences between senators and voters appear when the factor analysis produces two distinct clusters of environmental issues. One, the affective cluster deals with amenities such as littering, traffic congestion, and pollution, for which senators show close conformance to voter attitudes. This, too, is symbolic, since the tough decisions are not included. However, when the legislatures deal with substance, in the evaluative cluster which involves questions of whether to spend public funds or to regulate corporate actions, senators look more to the special interests, especially developmental interests, than to the public for cues.

Overall, the analysis makes a positive judgment of the legislatures' competence and capability. Senators show a more rational understanding of conflicts than do the voters, especially in technical issues, and in these issues they are more likely to substitute their judgments for those of the voters. Generally they agree with voters in ranking important problems facing their states.

The book can reward readers interested in either the politics of resource development in the four states, or the theory of representation. The style is academic, statistical, and not easy reading. The introduction of concepts sometimes forgets readers not familiar with recent theoretical concerns. There is some imprecision in background descriptions. But while more demanding editing would have helped, the authors' understanding of legislatures and of these states comes through. This, combined with methodological good sense, provides valuable description of the four states and of legislative representation.

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