

H-Net Reviews

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John S. Jackson, III, William Crotty. *The Politics of Presidential Selection*. New York: Harper-Collins, 1996. xi + 243 pp. \$21.52 (paper), ISBN 978-0-673-99627-5.

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The Presidential Election Game

The presidential election process fascinates scholars and politicians alike. The selection process coalesces out of conflict and contests during an extended nominating and election period and often appears to exist without rhyme or reason. In *The Politics of Presidential Selection*, John Jackson III and William Crotty endeavor to demonstrate the rationality of the selection process without losing the rich texture of the American electoral process.

Crotty and Jackson take a broad approach to presidential elections covering the historical nominating process; the current nomination process; the national conventions; the general presidential election process; and the intricacies of campaign finance. Additionally, the authors include a chapter on congressional, state, and local elections as an aside to the presidential selection process. The authors clearly intend their work for an undergraduate audience. Sophisticated political science theories are reduced to manageable discussions for introductory-level courses. In an effort to add a new twist to a standard overview of campaigns and elections, Crotty and Jackson present the modern campaign within a rational-actor model. They “argue from this rational decision making perspective ... [to] analyze how people behave in a political setting and why they behave as they do” (p. 6). The authors rely on the modified, or bounded-rationality model, in order to recognize the limits of the analytical device. Crotty and Jackson use rational choice within the limitation of real human beings, expecting that candidates and their staffs “make mistakes, suffer lapses of judgment, and are guilty of occasional outbursts of outrageous behavior and inexplicable failures to take action

of to adjust to changing circumstances” (p. 8). Using a bounded rationality model sets the stage for an analysis of the rules and processes to which the candidate must respond.

Each chapter of *The Politics of Presidential Selection* provides an excellent literature review of the topic under consideration, complemented by rich accounts of past campaigns. Political scientists will find the familiar names among the cited sources. Undergraduates will find the anecdotes entertaining and insightfully descriptive of the process. However, given the ambitious theoretical perspective which sets the stage for their discussion, the chapters leave the experienced reader searching for more. Crotty and Jackson do not use the rationality model to structure their analysis; rather they simply indicate how politics is rational.

Chapter Five, “The General Election,” provides Crotty and Jackson’s best attempt to structure activity using their bounded rationality model. Focusing on time, strategic variables and the rules of game, the authors do an excellent job explaining the choices available to the successful candidate (pp. 98-144). Unfortunately, the remaining chapters do not sustain use of bounded-rationality as their theoretical engine. Instead, Jackson and Crotty return to banal assignments of rational thought exemplified by this view of congress members. “We can see, in conclusion, that behavior that seems to be eminently rational from the viewpoint of the individual member of Congress’ perspective may, in the aggregate, not turn out to meet any very high-level definitions of

rationality, from an overall institutional perspective” (p. 164).

Crotty and Jackson’s efforts provide a thorough overview of the presidential election process. *The Politics of Presidential Selection* provides students in an introductory American politics an excellent understanding of the processes and imperatives driving candidates and their staffs. Moreover, the authors provide a means of overcoming the cynicism and apathy evident in Americans by demonstrating the motives behind the sometimes incomprehensible actions of candidates. However, this book is not as useful for an upper-level course since its broad approach often condenses political and theoretical complexities into extremely short sub-sections. Incidentally, Chapter Six, “Congressional, State, and Local Elections”, seems out of place, providing an abbreviated version of

non-presidential elections in a book overwhelmingly devoted to the presidential race.

The Politics of Presidential Selection provides fairly extensive coverage of a complex topic. Had Crotty and Jackson successfully applied the bounded rationality model to the entirety of the presidential selection process, this book would have been a truly welcomed addition to any course covering the presidential electoral process. Even without completely fulfilling its potential, *The Politics of Presidential Selection* remains a useful introductory tool for students with little knowledge of the political process or rational choice.

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