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Robert M. Stein, Kenneth N. Bickers. *Perpetuating The Pork Barrel: Policy Subsystems and American Democracy.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xiv + 232 pp. $25.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-59584-1; $64.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48298-1.

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Interest groups drive American politics and governance. Political pork fuels the engine. Stein and Bicker's book is a provocative assessment of how coalitions of interests help Congress to bring home the bacon and agencies to eat well.

A Political Portfolio Interpretation of Group Politics:

Policy subsystems are interactive networks of legislatures, interest groups, beneficiaries and agencies. Some commentators on American governance characterize subsystems as tight, three-way linkages between lobbyists, bureaucrats and legislators. This Iron Triangle is a closed, impermeable subsystem. Stein and Bicker find this model simple and unrealistic. Instead, they propose an alternative metaphor, the political portfolio.

The portfolio is the assortment of policies and programs some actors support. This diverse array contains some items with direct impacts on the home district or clientele. It also contains policies and programs that lack direct payoffs to one's constituencies. Rather, the portfolio provides resources and opportunities for joint actions.

Chapter Four, "A Portfolio Theory of Political Subsystems," presents the volume's conceptual core. The authors argue that the iron triangle literature is flawed because it cannot account for the infusion of new groups, fresh issues and shifting coalitions. Policy subsystems, Stein and Bicker contend, may resemble iron triangles under special circumstances, but under other circumstances, they are more like issue networks. Degree of insularity and permeability depends on political strategies used by actors in the policy process and constraints imposed by the larger governance system.

Both iron triangles and policy networks are special cases on a continuum of policy subsystems. Across the subsystem spectrum, actors are linked by sets of dyadic relationships (p. 51). No actor can pursue goals without cooperative behavior of other actors. The need for collective action causes interests to support a portfolio of programs in contrast to a single program. Actors get some individual programmatic outcomes, but the main payoff is an array of collective commitments and resources. Interest group pursuit of portfolios promotes joint behavior and lasting linkages. The subsystem is rich, complex and dynamic.

The authors' empirical analyses of Congressional budgetary outlays reject the idea that actors, especially legislators, lobbyists and bureaucrats, strive to universalize the spatial scope of program benefits. Analysis of the Reagan years, for example, shows that actors in policy subsystems regrouped, mutually supported each other and maintained agency and program salience. Additional empirical analysis shows that distributive policies do help legislators get reelected, but in a complex, collective manner beneficiaries, agencies and legislators.

Positive Analysis and Normative Concerns:

The portfolio metaphor and analyses presented by Stein and Bickers are well within the positive Pluralist tradition. Chapter Eight, "Policy Subsystems in Practice and Democratic Theory," ably shows their roots.

The authors reject four "myths" about federal assistant programs. Their analyses suggest that the budgetary impacts of policy subsystems has been exaggerated. They conclude that: (1) policy subsystems are not major contributors to the federal deficit; (2) some important domestic assistance programs do die; (3) most domestic assistance programs have limited geographic scope and eligibility is limited to a small number of recipients; and (4) the number of new projects, not their size, is the key to reelection and only for incumbents who are electorally vulnerable.

The rest of this short, concluding chapter discusses some "normative concerns." One normative concern is accountability of policy subsystems. The authors acknowledge this issue, but argue that Presidential control

is always problematical and perhaps unwise. They accept the portfolio behavior of interests and resulting ambiguity concerning accountability as Lindblom's mutual adjustment in action.

The authors' findings reject the role of universalism in pushing budgetary growth, but support concern about the lack of congruence between the public's preferences and real benefits. Interest groups get what they want even if the outcomes vary from the preferences of voters in electoral districts. Portfolio politics, like all interest group politics, distort the linkage between legislators and electoral constituents. Put another way, the interests become the constituents.

The subsystems provide, as the authors amply show, a steady supply of "electoral resources" to legislators. Most members of Congress, they argue, develop enough interest-based resources to head off serious challengers and to mount effective campaigns in those rare occasions when strong challenges occur.

Finally, the authors examine some current reform proposals including: the balanced budget amendment, the line-item veto, term limits, campaign finance reform, and institutional reforms. They think that internal reform of Congressional committee structure is a promising avenue for change. The rest are hopeless. Their meta-conclusion is that "policy subsystems are so intrinsic to the way American democracy operate that it is foolish to argue that they can be legislated out of existence" (p 151).

Limits of this Study of Pork:

This analysis, for all its empirical grounding, is limited to the national government. American policy and policy subsystems act within a system of federalism with rich intergovernmental and intersectoral linkages. This book focuses mostly on electoral politics and outcomes of Congressional actions. The portfolio metaphor is attractive, but the empirical base is too limited to tell if it is a useful general model of the rich, complex relationships of intersectoral and intergovernmental policy subsystems. As good as this book is in dealing with Congress, it is just a start in a promising direction.

This book does not examine democratic self-governance, but oligopolistic governance by political elites in the guise of competitive interests. It is less about representative democracy and more about how interests through the mobilization of resources can capture legislators and programs. This may be real politics, but the kind of incumbent- and interest-dominated policy subsystems described in this book subvert the needs and interests of the electorate and the citizens.

The authors see "tensions" in the real politics of political subsystems. These tensions are so monumental that one might call them basic contradictions. Pluralists, however, do not see contradictions and elites, but rather the need for "constant vigilance to assure that basic democratic values are preserved and cultivated" (p. 151). Whose vigilance? If the author's model and assessment of real politics are accurate, and their evidence is strong, there are few candidates for vigil. The subsystems are cozy coalitions of interests, legislators, media, agencies, and beneficiaries. If the subsystems are so inclusive and effective, who will tend the fires of democracy? Scholars, perhaps?

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