H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ballard C. Campbell. *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. x + 289 pp

Ballard C. Campbell. *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. x + 289 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-32871-7.

Reviewed by David B. Robertson

Published on H-Pol (May, 1998)

In *The End of Liberalism* (1969), Theodore Lowi argued that, during the New Deal, "interest group liberalism" had supplanted the rule of law as a guide to policy choice in the United States. Ballard Campbell's analysis of the growth of American government builds upon and in some ways transcends Lowi's book. Today's "claimant polity" has replaced the "republican polity" of the nineteenth century. Government growth has multiplied civic purposes, and the multiplication of civic purposes has multiplied claims on government. Special interests have demanded special treatment. Generally, the interests have gotten what they wanted. "Theorists of the republican polity identified this proclivity long ago. But efforts to prevent class legislation, as republicans had called special interest actions, waned in the claimant polity. It became expected if not actually acceptable behavior to lobby actively in defense of a public benefit" (p. 134).

Lowi, a political scientist, approached the analysis of interest group liberalism with a social scientist's penchant for generalization. Campbell, in contrast, brings a historian's eye for key details to the unfolding story of American public policy. For that reason, Campbell provides more subtle shading to the story of the emergence of the claimant polity. The origins of interest group liberalism are rooted in policy choices that antedate even the Progressive era. Because Campbell places Gilded Age policy in the republican tradition, readers work from conceptually rich base-

line as the story of government growth unfolds. Campbell also locates in mid-century policies the portents of the anti-government backlash that have altered American politics (and faith in American government) since 1978. Political scientists will appreciate Campbell's command of basic political science analyses of such topics as Congress, the presidency, and bureaucracy. Observations about the political self-interest of incumbent public officials enrich the historical narrative. The new historical-institutionalism also influences the analysis. The book emphasizes the importance of fundamental state capacity (such as tax and police power) in explaining political development. Political structure, and especially the multiple governments that hold a stake in public policy, constitute the most important set of constraints within which policy makers have constructed government expansion.

The resulting sweep of Campbell's narrative is impressive. He provides solid sketches of the fundamental and familiar, such as Social Security. He deftly uses more specialized programs, such as dairy price supports and trucking regulation, to add both nuance and detail to the portrait of growing government intervention. Using Arlington, Massachusetts, as a microscopic case, he returns to the local level to exemplify the local impact of this growth. The book is especially helpful when it bares the growing sinews of basic state powers: taxation, expenditure, the balance of fiscal power between the national and lower levels of government, and the emergence of national police capacity.

The book reminds us at the outset that governing in the republican polity was radically different from governing today. In 1887, President Cleveland could devote his entire annual message to the tariff problem--the problem, that is, of duties so high and expenditures so low that the federal budget surplus constituted a national embarrassment. It was a government so distant from ours that President Cleveland may have interrupted himself in preparing his message personally to answer the White House phone or doorbell. In this polity, Arlington, Massachusetts spent six times more per capita than the federal government. In this polity, it was virtually sport to find ways to obstruct policy-making capacity. Reforms limited the time and meetings of legislatures, or ensured amateur public administration, or strangled tax capacity.

Already in Cleveland's term, however, favorable social and economic conditions, constituent pressures, and government officials were bringing about the growth of American government. These changes presaged the broad reassessment of the civic role that exploded in Progressivism. In the early 1900s, much of government growth occurred at the state and local levels, and civic capacity began to centralize at the state level. The Progressive reforms of fiscal and administrative management at all levels of government were as important for transforming American civic capacity as the reforms of representation, political influence, political inclusion, and social and economic maladies. These reforms, as well as mobilization for World War I, brought about a sea change in civic expectations.

The book is at its best as it uncovers basic patterns of growing government power that emerge from this early twentieth century civic expansion. For example, Federal social controls by the 1920s now included federal crime, including federal prohibition agents, immigration officials, postal inspectors, and Treasury and Justice department agents. "Crimes defined by Federal law and arrests by Federal police officers were sure signs that the republican polity had expired," he observes (p. 80).

The middle chapters of the book provide an excellent review of American domestic policy development since the 1930s. Much of this survey is familiar: the acceptance of fiscal policy, growth of environmental and jobs programs, and the impact of federal highway policy on suburbanization, the

fiscal engine of Social Security, and the civil rights revolution. Less familiar but also important were developments in fiscal, administrative, and grants management.

The book shows how the seeds of today's cynicism about government were sown as policy and administrative developments pummeled the republican ideal. The expansion of income and Social Security taxation made the American state rely heavily on two very direct (and painfully obvious) forms of taxation, compared to the more hidden "value added" taxes that fueled fiscal expansion in many foreign nations. Intergovernmental transfer programs built the capacity to address problems, especially in the states, but it severed the connection between citizens and their representatives. Grants-in-aid also nationalized a broader range of policies without permitting any government to exercise the unilateral authority essential for fixing policy responsibility. Robert Moses, J. Edgar Hoover, and other such administrators subverted republican ideals by building up independent civil service power. Presidents undermined republican government by expanding discretionary power and policy leadership. Legislators became careerists. Their targeted policy accomplishments and services for constituents served to insulate most legislators from electoral defeat. Campbell's chapter on the new faces of power especially shows the influence of the more skeptical political science literature of the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Morris Fiorina, Douglas Arnold, and David Mayhew figure prominently in the story of the new Congress.

The tragic flaws of the claimant polity enabled Ronald Reagan to use republican rhetoric to try to restrain government growth. Vietnam and Watergate, abuses of power by national security agencies and stagflation all owed much to the indecisiveness and anti-republicanism that had fueled the growing claimant polity. The Reagan revolution capitalized on the resulting widespread disaffection from government and politics. As is well known, however, the Reagan era did not reduce the costs of government, did not substantially eliminate policy, did not radically reduce administrative capacity, and did not relieve the regulatory burden on states. Reagan explained his administration's failures in republican terms (blaming special interests), although the administration's coy allusions to special interests were selective, to put it kindly. The fragmentation of power, especially counter punches from Congress and the courts, and claimant attitudes about their own government benefits, resulted in a policy standoff despite the resurgence of conservative Republicanism.

Campbell concludes his book on the note of puzzlement about the future of the American polity that is so common among informed policy observers. He gives it historical perspective. Americans complained about big government, but did not want to change it fundamentally. "The dynamics bearing upon policy making in the restrained polity thus resembled the crosscurrents of impulses that had bedeviled politicians in Grover Cleveland's day" (p. 241).

Every sweeping book weakens itself for some readers by short-changing certain details and perhaps even a large elements of the story. Electoral politics and the effect of partisan rivalry on policy development are topics that are just too big to include in this book. Campbell to his credit does not try to do a superficial job on these topics. Any reader familiar with the story of an important policy development, whether Social Security, the Civil Rights Act, or the Clean Air Act of 1970, will recognize that subtle partisan dynamics played a greater role in specific policy choices than this narrative suggests. To the extent that partisan translation of larger social, cultural, and economic forces, rather than the forces themselves, shaped the nature of the claimant polity, Campbell's portrait is incomplete.

But this tightly organized book offers enough detail about American policy development to

make it an indispensable contribution. The book's heroic effort to make sense of this detail largely is successful. The book includes an outstanding eighteen-page bibliography that includes important historical sources as well as basic political science understandings of these developments. This is a book that the library of each institution of general higher education, including junior colleges, should make available to its students.

Citation: David B. Robertson. Review of Ballard C. Campbell. *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present.* ; Campbell, Ballard C. *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2036