

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barry R. Rubin. *A Citizen's Guide to Politics in America: How the System Works and how to Work the System*. Second edition. Armonk, N.Y. and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2000. x + 324 pp. \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0628-0; \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0627-3.

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Rubin believes that regular people can change how politics works. Technology—the power of the Internet, e-mail, listservs, and the capacity of computers to manipulate databases, for example—increases the individual's capacity to collect and disseminate information, contact public officials and others, and to organize. Among the techniques that Rubin introduces to the reader are how issues and power can be mapped. Polls and focus groups are other techniques. One can see which way the political winds are blowing—making sure to “pay as much attention to the messenger as the message” (p.73). One can try to educate (or influence) the public regarding the issue by using “studies and statistics” (p. 87). One can attempt to gain favorable news coverage, for example, by focusing on conflict or injustice, or by using celebrities. Among the other techniques that Rubin discusses are “hooking” a reporter“ (p. 114), advertising, developing “issue coalitions“ (p. 132), lobbying (how lobbyists function), boycotts, identification and mobilization of the grassroots, “mobilizing the grass tops“ (p. 194),[1] “marketing the issue to the public“ (p. 195), and “creating false fronts“ (p. 206). He explains that technology allows one to call a person and then connect him or her directly to a public official. Technology now makes it possible to engage in “grassroots campaigns conducted primarily through the internet“ (p. 223). Rubin also provides “keys to effective internet advocacy“ (p. 229) and addresses the techniques of the referendum and initiative.

It is clear that the techniques Rubin discusses can be used to pursue narrow self-interests or partisan interests in a fluctuating, zero-sum political game—precisely what Rubin thinks is wrong with the American political system. Rubin calls for a sea change in how poli-

tics works in the United States. Rubin would have all of us—politicians, interest groups, citizens, people involved with the media—focus on the public interest: we need to put what is in our common good first. The corrosive influence of money needs to be removed.

One wonders if “we the people” can make the system work for our common good if we do not have a robust understanding of “how the system works.” The book fails to provide this. One of the strengths of the book is it tells how to get heard. Perhaps Rubin’s intent was to focus on the process by which voices get heard, rather than explain the complete political system. To really understand “how the system works,” one would need to understand the presidency, the Congressional committee and subcommittee systems, government bureaucracies (including rule-making and adjudication), and the court systems, just for starters. Rubin does give some attention to rule-making and courts. Be that as it may, Rubin makes an important point, one that I believe can be made another way: what motivates our political involvement is the most important variable in the policy process. I agree. We are perhaps not sufficiently aware of the good that is done by those working in government. Allow me to use my Representative in the U.S. Congress, Jerry Moran, as an example. Representative Moran has offices in Hays, Kansas and Hutchinson, Kansas. The city of Hays has roughly 20,000 people. It also has a university with an enrollment “approaching 6,000 students,” though many of these are distance education students. Hutchinson “is a community of approximately 40,000 persons.”[2] Both the Hays and the Hutchinson offices receive requests for help—undoubtedly at least some of these requests come from outlying areas. It is estimated that every year the

office in Hays receives five hundred requests via e-mail, about the same through regular mail, and something like eight hundred by telephone. The office in Hutchinson receives “about the same” number of requests.[3] There is an attempt to acknowledge receipt of request for help within an estimated period of a week to ten days. Response to mail requests has been slowed because of adjustments in postal service since September 11. Acknowledgment of receipt of request for help via e-mail is estimated to occur much faster: within two or three days. It is estimated that, overall, 75-80 percent of the petitioners receive a “timely and courteous response” from the relevant agency.[4] If “success” is defined as the recipient getting what s/he wants, the level of success depends on the type of case. In cases where it is deemed hardest to obtain the desired result (for example, a military person attempting “to go outside the chain of command”[5] regarding a transfer), the estimated success rate is 33.3 percent. In a second type of case (for example, cases dealing with the IRS or the INS), the estimated success rate is in the range of 40-60 percent. In a third type of case (for example, those dealing with veterans’ benefits or passport issues), the estimated success rate is in the range of 65-70 percent.

Yes, there are plenty of things wrong with the political systems of the United States and Rubin’s concern is well taken. Perhaps our motivation for political involvement is too often based on self-interest rather than “the common good” or “public interest.” But we do need to remember that there is goodness in many who serve in the public sector. Among a few there is greatness. September 11, 2001 should disabuse us of notions to the contrary.

Notes

[1]. “Grass Tops” are defined as “especially persuasive or powerful people who have a special relationship with, or power over, decision makers” (pp. 194, 195).

[2]. See <http://www.fhsu.edu/campus.html> (viewed May 24, 2002).

[3]. Phone interview on May 24, 2002 with Kirk Johnson, Congressman Jerry Moran’s District Director. The estimates, and the other data reported subsequently in the paragraph, are from this phone interview.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Ibid.

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