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Engines Of Democracy: Politics And Policymaking In State Legislatures



Synopsis

State legislators have often been in the shadow of their national counterparts, but they drive the processes of democracy. Rosenthal brings together a lifetime of research and experience on state legislative politics into one eminently readable volume - a dynamic, inside view of the people involved, the politics that prevail, and the interest groups and lobbyists who advocate their causes. Building on earlier work with new data and recent interviews and observations, Rosenthal looks at the way representation works, Americans' critical view of their legislatures, the role of legislative leaders, the dynamics of executive-legislative relationships, as well as norms and ethics. Both a complement and contrast to the policymaking process on Capitol Hill, *Engines of Democracy* proves that no one gives insight into state legislators and their work the way Alan Rosenthal can.

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Customer Reviews

Alan Rosenthal is Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University. He has collaborated in activities with the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the Council of State Governments (CSG), and the State Legislative Leaders Foundation (SLLF) and worked on projects and studies for legislatures in about 35 states. Currently, he is working with NCSL, the American Political Science Association (APSA), and the Center for Civic Education on the development and communication of a new public perspective on representative democracy. In New Jersey, he chaired the Ad Hoc Commission on Legislative Ethics and Campaign Finance in 1990, was selected as the independent member and chair of the

Redistricting Commission in 1992, and in 1993 received the Governor's Award for Public Service. In 1995 Rosenthal received APSA's Charles E. Merriam Award, which honors a person whose published work and career represent a significant contribution to the art of government through the application of social science research. His recent books include *Republic on Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy* (Rosenthal et al., 2003) and *Heavy Lifting: The Job of the American Legislature* (2005).

Alan Rosenthal, perhaps the only professional political scientist who has concentrated his research efforts on state legislatures, has published a book that best summarizes his career of research. This is the best researched book on state legislatures ever. Readers will learn how legislators identify with the districts that elect them. State legislatures across the country are examples of how representative democracy operates. Rosenthal sees state legislatures are operating more effectively than most of the public and media recognize. The legislative process, in most cases, works. Legislative districts tend to be small enough that legislators hear of, and know, their constituent needs. While there was once a historical disconnect between the issues discussed in legislative elections and the matters legislators faced, increased public awareness has bridged the concerns of voters to what legislator debate. Constituents have expectations of their legislators. As one legislator noted, a constituent complaining about a barking dog explained to him that "I don't want you to do anything. I just want you to listen." Constituents are important to legislators. 42% of legislators who were surveyed stated constituent work took "a great deal" of their time. On a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the most important, legislators on average, and with only small variation amongst states, rated constituent rate as being 4.46 on the scale of importance. Lobbyists have suffered from media scorn and public disapproval. Many experts, also referred to as people in the knowledge network, believe lobbyists have too much influence within the legislative process. Every state has more legislators than lobbyists. Many successful lobbyists have rallied interest groups to present their strongest cases before legislators. The Governor is seen as a Legislator in Chief. The Governor proposes the most important piece of legislation, the budget. The Governor is an active participant in shaping how the legislator responds to the budget and other legislative proposals. The Governor decides whether to sign or veto legislation. Debate is a part of the legislative process. About half of those surveyed within the knowledge network recognize that bickering and compromise are important components of the legislative process. About a third of those surveyed think there are too many disagreements. The book contains some interesting public survey information. In 2008, 42% of those surveyed did not approve of the Pennsylvania legislature (a

decrease from 48% in the 2007 survey), 37% approved of the Pennsylvania legislature (an increase from 34% in 2007), while 21% had no opinion (an increase from 18% in 2007). This is not uncommon. Connecticut is the only state out of 8 states where such surveys exist that found more of the public approve of their General Assembly than there are those who dislike it. There is an old saying that "I've got two boys and I'm mighty proud of them. Neither has ever been in the penitentiary or the legislature." Legislators tend to be from the upper or upper middle class. Candidates, and thus elected legislators, tend to have high self-esteem. Most sought to run for office. The days of party leaders begging people to run are mostly gone, although party recruitment was found a factor in New York, Connecticut, and Vermont. The most noticeable changing trend in legislative composition in recent decades is the increase in the numbers of female legislators. Rosenthal finds most state legislators are competent and honest officials. Those who aren't may get disproportionate attention, yet they are only a few of the legislators. Most legislators tend to serve until they believe they have gotten what they personally sought from the experience. Many tend to leave being legislators after around ten years. The largest political shift in the composition of legislators over recent decades has been the growing numbers of Republican legislators in Southern states, where they are now mostly the majority party in legislative bodies. The South is a section of the nation where 95% of state legislators in the 1950s were Democrats. In 2004, there were 3,663 Democratic state legislators and 3,642 Republican state legislators across the nation. In 1979, there were 16,930 legislative staffers nationwide. This number grew to 24,555 in 1988 and 27,822 in 1996. The number has increased only slightly since 1996. 12 states including Pennsylvania have mostly partisan staffs. Legislative leaders have become important components of election campaigns and fund raising. In previous decades, political parties and individual campaigning had greater importance than today. Legislative leaders tend to take criticism for their caucuses. The rank and file members tend to elect leaders willing to be the defenders of their caucus, especially during critical times. Some legislative leaders are seen as great strategists in getting legislation passed. The days of controlling leaders has diminished as rank and file members are more apt to feel more responsible to their constituents than their leaders. The 1970s and 1980s saw legislators demanding and receiving greater oversight roles over Administrative actions. Legislators have become more powerful relative to the Executive branch as they become more full time and have more professional staffs.

This was purchased as a text book for my significant other. If you have not discovered that you can purchase most text books at a better rate online, it is time to discover that. After my honey was done

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dr. rosenthal is a professor of mine at eagleton. literally, i think he knows just about everything there is to know about state legislatures. this book is exhaustive yet written in a very approachable style. you will definitely learn something new within its pages. a great introduction by an expert!

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