Taking Stock

American Government in the Twentieth Century

Edited by
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1

Taking Stock

MORTON KELLER

"History doesn't repeat itself," Mark Twain once observed, "but it rhymes." And it is true that more than a little assonance links the issues and responses of early and late twentieth-century American government. Then, as now, there was a widespread belief that, despite the lack of major threats from abroad or economic depression at home, things were deeply wrong with the nation's government and political parties, its economic institutions, and its social system. Politically active Americans at the beginning of the century, like their counterparts at the century's end, sought policies designed to do something about political corruption and government inefficiency, the concentration of economic wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands, the condition of families and children and the provision of social welfare, the inadequacies of education and conservation of the environment, cultural and racial diversity and the size and impact of immigration, the failures of the criminal justice system, and even the ingestion of harmful substances such as liquor, drugs, and tobacco.

Then, as now, programs for change flowed not so much from the bottom up as from the top down. Intellectuals and academics, socially conscious businessmen and professionals, journalists and reformers (including a number of highly educated women) gave shape and substance to much of the reform agenda. And public life at the two ends of the century saw the rise of spokespersons for groups—women, blacks, and Native Americans then and now; the handicapped and gays and lesbians today—not previously participants in American political life.

While these advocates looked to the major political parties for support, they relied more heavily on special-purpose organizations, who lobbied politicians and tried to shape the course of public policy through media-

disseminated investigation and disclosure. It is worth noting that those who fear that too many Americans are "bowling alone"—that is, are insufficiently organized into voluntary associations working for the public good—look back to the early twentieth century as a golden age of that extraparty involvement.

In 1912 a third-party candidate helped to defeat an incumbent Republican president and put a Democrat in the White House. The same thing happened in 1992. Though no one would more closely equate Theodore Roosevelt and Ross Perot, this was not an entirely coincidental reprise. In both the early and late years of the twentieth century (though far more so now than then), party ties weakened, encouraging new types of leaders to make direct appeals to the public on issues that cut across traditional partisan lines.

So it is not difficult to see striking similarities between American politics and government at the two ends of this century. But it is evident as well that major changes have reshaped American politics and government over the course of the past hundred years.

The sheer scale of the public agenda today is so much larger than it was a century ago that the difference becomes a qualitative as well as a quantitative one. And there appears to be a deep underlying difference in policy purpose. At the beginning of the century the desire to restore an (imagined) American past was uppermost. Conservation, muckraking and political reform, prohibition, immigration restriction, racial segregation, and trustbusting were efforts to restore an old social and economic order, not to create a new one. In contrast, the economic policies of the New Deal and the social policies of the Great Society sought not restoration but reconstruction: to use public policy to create new conditions and new relationships.

The relative weights of government and party politics are vastly different today from the early years of the century. The courts are more interventionist; agencies, regulators, the bureaucracy, and the media are more extensive and intrusive. The money funneled through federal agencies, and the government's consequent impact on American life and work, had no counterpart in the early 1900s. Conversely, elections, parties, and the party identification of voters have a much diminished place in our public life compared to a century ago.

Values and norms—regarding race and gender, sex and the family, social welfare—have changed enormously. So too have the integuments of social and economic life. A population once defined by rural, small town,

or urban residence now is primarily suburban, secondarily urban. Less than 2 percent of the workforce is on farms; a similar fraction labors in factories. White collar and service occupations now are the American norm.

So we have the paradoxical situation that the forms that public life assumed a hundred years ago powerfully resonate with us today; yet they do so across the span of a century that has seen massive economic, social, and cultural change. Given this, what larger understanding of the present state and future prospects of the American polity may be gained from a closer comparative look at how government worked in the early and late twentieth century?

We readily concede that history does not teach simple, practical lessons. But it is profoundly instructive to be reminded, and *re*-reminded, that present concerns have a deep past, and that an awareness of that past will enrich our understanding of current public policy. Linking the past and present experience of American government with major issues—particularly so when it is done with the intimacy and analytical insight of the essays in this book—is in the fullest sense an educational experience. Just as a knowledge of background, setting, and historical context inevitably adds to one's comprehension of a work of art or literature, so does the juxtaposition of the past and present record of American government make for a wiser, more sophisticated apprehension of its current state and future prospects. As the Clinton presidential crisis in 1999 demonstrated, there is a powerful tendency to dwell on the here and now of American governance without much regard for its longer, deeper currents.

The contributors to this volume have gone about the task of comparing, and drawing lessons from, the experience of a century by focusing on five major public issues. These are: tariff and trade policy, the regulation of immigration and aliens, conservation and environmentalism, civil rights, and social welfare. Others might have served as well: antitrust and business regulation; the reform of elections, Congress, and the bureaucracy; the regulation of social behavior (drinking, smoking, drug-taking, prostitution). But the ones we have chosen broadly engaged both the polity and public opinion. And each has a coherence that lends itself particularly well to an exploration of continuities and discontinuities in twentieth-century American government.

We asked historians and political scientists to examine these issues with due regard for the other discipline's concerns. We did not want to wash away the insight and understanding that is peculiar to each discipline, nor

could we have done so. In this sense each essay stands on its own, speaking in its disciplinary voice—to the extent that the footnoting form customary to each field has been left undisturbed: no foolish consistency here.

No more fixed is the meaning we attach to the "beginning" and the "end" of the century. Trends and contrasts over time are what we are after. In the cases of the tariff, conservation/environmentalism, and immigration, this leads to a comparison of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries with the past fifty years. In the case of modern social welfare, the dictates of history tend to make the comparison more precise: the 1930s with the 1990s. Civil rights demands an even more compressed time span: from the 1940s–60s to the 1970s–90s.

Case studies of particular policies inevitably run the risk of slighting the larger historical developments that shape the contours of American life. It is not our intent to minimize the importance of depression and prosperity, war and peace, the growth of taxation and bureaucracy, the new role of the media, or significant changes in popular culture. We believe, though, that there is much to be gained by an examination of the workings of American government not from the top down—from the vantage point of these large historical forces—but from the bottom up: from the ground level of issues that directly and substantively engaged the American state. Larger developments will appear when they should appear: as part of the setting in which these issues lived their lives.

The remainder of this introduction sets the stage for the essays that constitute the core of the book. Then the essay authors will speak to you in their various voices. The editors return at the end with a conclusion that seeks to suggest what the essays tell us about the evolution, present state, and (perhaps) future shape of American government.

TRADE POLICY

The tariff, along with taxation and defense, is one of the oldest and most continuous of American issues, dating from the earliest days of the Republic. Because of this it is a particularly valuable source of insight into what has changed, and what has not, in modern American government.

In some respects, tariff-and-trade policy as an issue has altered little since the early Republic. From the beginning, a welter of commercial, manufacturing, and agricultural interests, each with its own fix on what that policy should be, has interacted with a political system—parties,

Congress, the Presidency—that responded both to those special interests and to broader public concerns.

But looked at more closely, trade policy has undergone sea changes of great and revealing scale. During the nineteenth century the tariff was an important and consistent element in the definition of party ideology. As Morton Keller observes, protection for the Republicans and free trade for the Democrats were symbols of party identity freighted not only with economic but also with ideological, sectional, even cultural meaning. That has been less and less true over the course of the twentieth century.

Nor has American trade policy been consistent—or even consistently inconsistent. A protectionist regime prevailed during the three-quarters of a century from the Civil War to the Great Depression. An open-trade regime has had comparable primacy over a comparable sweep of time from the 1930s to the present. Insofar as there is any party identity to trade policy today, it reverses the prevailing nineteenth-century norm: a mild Democratic-labor-populist protectionism, a Republican-business preference for more open trade.

But more has happened to tariff policy than the fading and fudging of its party salience. The way in which it is made has altered fundamentally. Tariff making in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was in the hands of Congress. Today, trade policy is the province of executive agencies, commissions, and boards, subject to occasional up-or-down Congressional votes. What was once a defining issue of party politics has become entwined in bureaucratic and regulatory processes that substantially curtail its use for partisan advantage. As David Vogel observes, an issue with substantial material consequence, one in which large numbers of people have compelling grounds for dissatisfaction with the existing open-trade regime, is strikingly resistant to partisan alignment (as the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the 1996 presidential election made clear).

Here as much as anywhere, the belief that the evolution of the twentieth-century American state has been from parties and legislatures to administrative agencies seems to hold. But it is premature to assume that the traditional interplay of politics and government has disappeared because the complexities of modern life have led to new ways of implementing policy. Indeed, stirrings in the current political scene suggest that the tariff issue continues to have strong (if, at the moment, latent) partisan political potential.

This raises an important question. Does the history of trade policy suggest that the character of twentieth-century American government has been shaped primarily by alterations in its institutional *forms:* the decline of the parties, the rise of the bureaucratic-regulatory state? Or is it more proper to focus on the changing *substance* of the issue itself: on the fact that in its character and relative importance, trade policy at the end of this century is very different from what it was a hundred years ago?

In the past, it took a cataclysmic event to set American trade policy on a new course. The Civil War initiated the protectionist regime; the Great Depression, and World War II and its aftermath, set the stage for the freer trade regime that has prevailed in recent times. Would it take social upset on a comparable scale to thrust us once again into protectionism? Or is our trade policymaking, for all its bureaucratic trappings, still sensitive to political winds?

IMMIGRATION

In a number of respects immigration resembles trade as a policy issue. It too is as old as the Republic. And it has had long periods of continuity: free immigration through the nineteenth century, an increasingly restrictive regime during the early and mid-twentieth century, a more liberal policy in recent decades.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the regulation of immigration—deciding who and how many should come, and how immigrants should be treated once they came—was a major public concern. After a number of restrictive steps, a national policy of quota-based control came into place during the early 1920s. In its social consequences it was (along with prohibition) the most important policy enactment of its time.

The distractions of depression, war, and the postwar boom kept immigration off the national agenda for half a century. After the Second World War, Europe's return to prosperity and emigration restrictions in the Soviet bloc substantially reduced the pressure for large-scale flows of people from that part of the world. Instead, emigrants from Latin America and Asia clamored for admission. This coincided with the moderation of American racial prejudices. One by-product of that change was the elimination of national origins quotas in 1965 and a greater readiness to receive immigrants from the world at large. The result was the resumption, after a forty-year lapse, of large-scale immigration. From the mid-

1960s to the mid-1990s some 25 million newcomers came to the United States, three quarters of them from Asia and Latin America.

Beginning in the early 1970s the postwar economic boom ended, foreign competition (in automobiles, textiles, etc.) grew, and unemployment became an important political issue. These conditions fueled a host of economic, social, and cultural concerns about immigrants—from the vantage point of the early twentieth century, eerily familiar ones. Now, at century's end, there are signs that the issue of immigration could take on a salience comparable to that at the century's beginning. In this respect, too, it is very much like trade policy, and a comparably useful measure of what has changed, and what has persisted, in twentieth-century American government.

Reed Ueda focuses on the most distinctive aspect of immigration policy in the early years of this century: the inclination to categorize newcomers by group or racial character rather than individual qualities. Immigration restriction drew on popular xenophobia, a widely accepted and intellectually respectable belief in the racial sources of social behavior, organized labor fearful of mass immigration's threat to jobs and wage standards, and industrialists less hungry for cheap labor from abroad and more fearful of the radicalism that was supposed to come with the newcomers. Given so broad a popular base, it is not surprising that a restrictive system was readily enacted.

Peter Skerry echoes Ueda's stress on group consciousness. He focuses on the degree to which ethnic identity (in part politically crafted) has played an important role in the politics of Hispanics. But his account reveals a significant difference between the century's beginning and its end. The definition of group identity in the earlier period was primarily in the hands of the receiving society. Now it rests with the immigrant groups themselves, or at least their self-designated spokesmen. When once to be identified as a racial, ethnic, or linguistic minority carried a heavy social stigma, now it can convey considerable political and economic advantage.

The late twentieth-century revolution in racial attitudes has brought with it powerful sanctions against the kind of racism that infused the immigration issue in the early 1900s. But identity politics today raises the specter of a separatism that might lead to both a majoritarian backlash and self-destructive group isolation. Is separatism trumped by the assimilating power of contemporary popular culture? Or will immigration and group relations assume something of the social explosiveness that they

had at the beginning of this century? That is the question to which the Ueda and Skerry essays address themselves.

CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

The conservation of natural resources first fully entered the realm of public policy making in the early twentieth century. The nineteenth was a century of development, exploitation, and expansion, fed by the same national attitude that accepted open immigration. It was only around the turn of the century that the fear of scarcity and deprivation began to secure a foothold in the American political consciousness, and make conservation (like immigration restriction) a significant public issue.

Today, of course, the environmental movement (the change in name is suggestive: not just husbanding scarce resources, but saving an endangered ecosystem) has enormous policy weight. In part this is because of the material interests at stake. But more important is the passion and commitment of those caught up in a cause that touches on widespread anxieties in contemporary American society: not unlike the fear of a flood of newcomers that fed immigration restrictionist sentiment earlier in the century.

Environmentalism became a major public issue not because of the power of the economic interests at stake but because of its high cultural and ideological resonance. Does this matter? That is to say, do issues that are more sociocultural than economic have a distinctive political, legislative, and administrative history? Has there been a tendency, over the century, for cultural issues to occupy a more important place in national politics than more material ones? Has environmentalism in fact become a more broadly shared public concern? Or is it now, as it was a century ago, largely the property of a social elite?

The Pisani and Melnick essays cast much light on these questions. They make evident the continuities between early twentieth-century conservation and late twentieth-century environmentalism. These include the tension between conservation for use and the preservationist/environmentalist ethic, and between local interests and national policies; the frequent, and frequently distorted, use of science in policy debates; and the complex interplay of regulatory bureaucracies jockeying for power and place.

But changes in the tone, character, and outcome of this issue are no less striking. The old conservationism described by Pisani was notable for the degree to which local interests, and material concerns over scarcity and

depletion—conservation for use—triumphed over the preservationist impulse. Quite the contrary is the case in the regulatory world of the new environmentalism.

Is current environmentalist milieu, in which the media, organized pressure groups, Congress, the president, the courts, and regulatory agencies engage in a complex *ronde* of policy making, implementation, and oversight, representative of American government now and in the foreseeable future? Or are there signs that tradeoffs between environmentalism and economic development, between central and local control, between government by experts, interests, and public opinion, are still very much in play? Environmentalism, like trade and immigration policy, is a litmus test for the questions of change and continuity, of elitism and democracy, that are at the core of this book.

CIVIL RIGHTS

Civil rights is the most recent of our major policy issues, and for much of the second half of the twentieth century the most hard fought and prominent. The politics of race relations have an intensity not evident in tariff or immigration debates or even in the more emotional realms of environmentalism or social welfare. This reflects the fact that race has been for American public life what class has been for many European nations: the society's great fault line.

As Hugh Davis Graham observes, the full force of civil rights as an issue burst on American public life in the second half of the twentieth century. (Aside from its legislation and its place in historical memory, the Civil War–Reconstruction interlude had little connection with the modern movement.)

The modern civil rights movement has gone through two distinct phases. The first was an assault on segregation and discrimination in politics, public accommodations, and the workplace, stretching from the Fair Employment Practice Committee of 1941 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Since then, what Graham calls "a new social regulation" has come into prominence: affirmative action (ranging from guidelines and goals to preferences and quotas), and the extension of nondiscrimination and affirmative action to groups other than blacks—Hispanics and Asians, women, gays, the handicapped.

The civil rights legislation of the 1960s remains unchallenged. Discrimination per se has no political or legal, and greatly diminished popu-

lar, standing. But the new social regulation is a source of increasing contention. In its favor stands a powerful interlocking network of government agencies, activist pressure groups and lobbying organizations, and strong elements of support in the courts, the media, and the academy. Against it is a more diffuse public hostility to affirmative action (at least in its more assertive forms) reflected in politics, legal decisions, and state referenda.

Jennifer Hochschild asks why it is that some civil rights policies have been so successful while others have so miserably failed. Her distinction between "power to" and "power over" closely parallels Graham's distinction between the first and second phases of civil rights legislation. The former directly applied the power of the state to desegregate the armed forces, schools, and public accommodations. The latter attempted complex, indirect social engineering, which is harder to implement. Equal access to housing, fair employment practices, and affirmative action are prime examples.

Thus a common view of what has happened in civil rights appears in two distinctive formats. Graham's perspective is historical and cultural; Hochschild's approach is more schematic and focuses on how the issue fits into the American system of politics, government, and law. Together they provide insights into the present state and future prospects of civil rights as a touchstone issue of the American state.

SOCIAL WELFARE

Theda Skocpol's discussion of social policy in twentieth-century America assumes the dual obligations of the historian and the political scientist. It is both an insightful look back and a keen-eyed look around and ahead. She reminds us that social welfare did not spring full-blown from the brow of Franklin Delano Roosevelt with the Social Security Act of 1935 but had a long (and distinctively American) past. The spread of universal public schooling in the early nineteenth century was in fact a strong and consequential social welfare policy. (The same might be said of the rapid distribution of cheap or free public land.) The large-scale distribution of pensions to post–Civil War veterans also provided social welfare on a massive scale (as well as being a major political prop to the Republican party). And the passage of laws to provide mothers' pensions during the early twentieth century was a prelude to the Aid to Dependent Children

provision of the Social Security Act (and a case study in post-Victorian paternalism).

This does not necessarily add up to a nascent welfare state. But it suggests that social welfare has historical parameters with considerable relevance to our own time. The localism that made the rise of public schools a concern of states and localities rather than the nation would be echoed a century and a half later in opposition to a national health system. The earlier identification of welfare with "deserving" groups—children, Civil War veterans, dependent mothers—recurred with the bestowal of benefits on World War II veterans through the G.I. Bill and on senior citizens through Medicare. A similar differentiation lay behind the recent reduction of benefits to single mothers on welfare. Even Social Security, the broadest of American social welfare enactments, was initially restricted in ways that reflected particular political interests and the stern demands of fiscal soundness.

The prospects of social welfare now and in the near future bear the weight of this historical baggage. Is it determining? Can it be overcome? Should it be overcome? These are the questions that Skocpol addresses. Her discussion of what is desirable, what is possible, and what seems unattainable is an apt and revealing commentary on Oliver Wendell Holmes's subtle admonition, which might well stand as a precept for all of the essays in this book: "Continuity with the past is only a necessity, and not a duty."

The authors of these essays do not make identical—or always compatible—arguments. Obliged to choose between scholars who are knowledgeable and those who are like-minded, we took the former. Some of the contributors are most impressed with continuity over the century, others with the extent of change. Some focus on transformations in political institutions, others on the shifting economic and social environment. Readers will no doubt take note of the historians' taste for detail and contingency, and the political scientists' penchant for abstraction and theorizing.

The editors—a historian and a political scientist—have sought in their scholarship and teaching to bring the insight and understanding of their fields into closer contact than is customary in an age of academic disciplines marching to their own, often discordant, drummers. This project is an outgrowth of that experience. It is designed not only to add to the

general understanding of how American government has worked in the twentieth century, but also to show what political history and political science have to offer to—and learn from—one another. Our hope is that this interplay between the disciplinary perspectives of history and political science adds up to a whole that is something more than the sum of its parts.