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978-1-107-02300-0 - Representation and Inequality in Late Nineteenth-Century America: The Politics of Apportionment

Peter H. Argersinger

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Representation and Inequality in Late Nineteenth-Century America

This book demonstrates that apportionment, although long overlooked by scholars, dominated state politics in late nineteenth-century America, setting the boundaries not only for legislative districts but for the nature of representative democracy. The book examines fierce struggles over apportionment in the Midwest, where a distinctive constitutional and electoral context shaped their course with momentous consequences. As the major parties alternated in effectively disfranchising their opponents through gerrymanders, growing tensions challenged established patterns of political behavior and precipitated intense and even dangerous disputes. Unprecedented judicial intervention overturned gerrymanders in stunning decisions that electrified the public but intensified rather than resolved political conflict and uncertainty. Ultimately, America's political ideal of representative democracy was frustrated by its own political institutions, including the courts, because their decisions against gerrymandering in the 1890s helped parties and legislatures entrench the practice as a basic and profoundly undemocratic feature of American politics in the twentieth century.

Peter H. Argersinger holds a PhD from the University of Wisconsin. From 1971 to 1998, he was a professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and he held the distinguished position of Presidential Research Professor from 1995 to 1998. Since 1998, he has been a professor at Southern Illinois University, where he was named Outstanding Scholar by the College of Liberal Arts. He has also been a Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, and he has received an Andrew Mellon Fellowship from the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Helm Research Fellowship from Indiana University, and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Historical Association. He has received the Binkley-Stephenson Award of the Organization of American Historians for the best article published in the *Journal of American History*. His work has appeared in the *American Historical Review*, the *Political Science Quarterly*, the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, *American Nineteenth Century History*, *Agricultural History*, the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, and other journals. He is the author of six books including *Populism and Politics* (1974); *Structure, Process, and Party* (1991); and *The Limits of Agrarian Radicalism* (1995).

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“*Representation and Inequality in Late Nineteenth-Century America* is a thoroughly researched and finely crafted account tackling the much neglected subject of legislative apportionment during the Gilded Age. Argersinger exposes the intellectual gymnastics and hardball politics of legislators, governors, and judges as they subverted the democratic process through partisan-inspired gerrymandering. In the process, they grappled with such fundamental concepts as representation, community, and political parties. Apportionment issues roiled politics across the Midwest as partisans indignantly railed against redistricting schemes that threatened to do to them what they were determined to do to their opponents.”

– John F. Reynolds, University of Texas at San Antonio

“This deeply researched and engaging study provides major insights into issues of representation and the political conflict in the Midwest during the 1890s. Deftly weaving the stories of different state struggles over apportionment, Argersinger carefully lays out the developing political and legal arguments and the various roles of legislatures, state officials, party leaders, and the courts. He adds significantly to our understanding of the watershed nature of the 1890s by showing the brutal political struggle that occurred over apportionment and explaining how and why the issue disappeared thereafter.”

– Philip VanderMeer, Arizona State University

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For Jo Ann

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As always, I am most indebted to my wife, Jo Ann E. Argersinger. A superb historian herself, she generously took time from her own work to assist in the research for this book, despite often being appalled by what she uncovered. She also not only patiently endured my endless musings on the dynamics of apportionment, but also consistently prodded me to think of the larger context and the greater issues involved. And although I could not always find answers to her questions, the book is much the better for her interest. It is with appreciation, admiration, and love that I dedicate this book to her.