Between one election and the next, members of Congress introduce thousands of bills. What determines which become law? Is it the public? Do we have government “of the people, by the people, for the people”? Or is it those who have the resources to organize and pressure government who get what they want? In the first study ever of a random sample of policy proposals, Paul Burstein finds that the public can get what it wants – but mainly on the few issues that attract its attention. Does this mean organized interests get what they want? Not necessarily – on most issues there is so little political activity that it hardly matters. Politics may be less of a battle between the public and organized interests than a struggle for attention. American society is so much more complex than it was when the Constitution was written that we may need to reconsider what it means, in fact, to be a democracy.

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American Public Opinion, Advocacy, and Policy in Congress

What the Public Wants and What It Gets

PAUL BURSTEIN

University of Washington
For Florence, my life’s love
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Acknowledgments

This book owes the most to two people who probably weren’t even aware of how much influence they had on me. First, Bill Gamson, whose work has always been an inspiration to me, for his creativity, willingness to take intellectual risks, and commitment to social justice. I got an idea that proved crucial to the development of the book and my conclusions – the idea of studying a random sample of policies – from his path-breaking study of a sample of challenging groups in The Strategy of Social Protest (1975). True, it was 25 years after publication that the idea really hit me, but the slow pace was my fault, not his. Second, Claude Fischer, who not only read and commented on an entire earlier draft of the book, but whose support and advice have been important to me since we met our first year in graduate school.

I also owe a great deal to three graduate students who started off as research assistants and became co-authors – Shawn Bauldry, Paul Froese, and Elizabeth Hirsh – whose work is reflected most significantly in Chapters 2 and 6. Evan Jewett was the graduate research assistant who helped make the impossible (or at least the unprecedented) possible; his work on the ideas and data collection that are central to Chapters 4 and 5, and his dedication to the project well beyond what I could have reasonably asked, played a critical role in the book.
There are many others to thank as well. Some provided feedback on earlier versions of the work, others technical advice, still others support and inspiration at important moments. I hadn’t realized how long the list would be: Frank Baumgartner, John C. Berg, Clem Brooks, Allan Cigler, Bill Domhoff, George Farkas, Patty Glynn, Lowell Hargens, Michael Hechter, Alex Hicks, Kim Quaile Hill, Robert Max Jackson, Lawrence Jacobs, Craig Jenkins, Bryan D. Jones, David Knoke, Liz Lammert, John D. McCarthy, Debra Minkoff, Alan Monroe, Steve Pfaff, Sarah Sausner, Wendy Schiller, Mark A. Smith, Kate Stovel, Ann Swidler, Stewart Tolnay, John Wilkerson, and Christopher Wlezien. I also benefited from feedback during presentations at the University of California, Irvine; the University of Washington; Indiana University; and the University of Uppsala. A grant from the National Science Foundation, SES-0001509, made the work possible, and for that I’m greatly appreciative. And I want to thank Lew Bateman, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for his open-mindedness and support.

Three chapters in the book appeared previously in other forms. Thanks go to my co-authors for granting permission to include the articles we published, and to the following:


Acknowledgments

Finally, I want most to thank my family, though I feel as though I hardly know how. Nathan, Anna, and Deborah grew up hearing more about policy change than they wanted to; they made me keep my priorities straight, even if they may not have realized it at the time. Florence read and edited, listened and supported, loved and was loved; her worth is indeed far above rubies.