

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13753-9 - Contemporary Politics in Australia: Theories, Practices and Issues

Edited by Rodney Smith, Ariadne Vromen and Ian Cook

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CONTEMPORARY Politics in Australia

THEORIES, PRACTICES AND ISSUES

Contemporary Politics in Australia provides a lively and wide-ranging introduction to the study of Australian politics. Written by a diverse range of experts, the book offers a comprehensive overview of current theories, debates and research in Australian political science and looks forward to new developments. It encompasses not only formal and institutionally based politics, but also the informal politics of everyday life, including the politics of Australian culture and media. The book is divided into six key sections that cover:

- contemporary political theory
- politics in everyday Australian life
- elections
- participation and representation
- the Australian state
- contemporary political and public policy issues.

Contemporary Politics in Australia challenges the assumption that the study of Australian politics can be dry, descriptive or uncontroversial. Rather, it encourages an understanding of politics in Australia as contested ground. Featuring a glossary of key terms and a companion website, it is essential reading for students.

Rodney Smith is Associate Professor in Australian Politics in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney.

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INTRODUCTION

Rodney Smith, Ariadne Vromen and Ian Cook

Australian **politics** is part of the curriculum of almost all political science courses in Australian universities. It is sometimes seen by students as something that they have to get out of the way in first year before they can move on to more interesting, theoretical and controversial material throughout the rest of their degrees. Some students even think that they have learnt all there is to know about Australian politics already in high school history, social science or civics classes.

The broadest aim of this book is to challenge such prejudices. Researching and studying Australian politics are not atheoretical, descriptive or uncontroversial tasks. This book promotes an understanding of Australian politics as contested ground. While the chapters in this book provide some introductory material on Australian political institutions and practices, they also introduce readers to a range of current academic theories and controversies surrounding aspects of Australian politics. Debate, scepticism and uncertainty are kept to the fore throughout. In some ways, this book may be seen as domestically oriented complement to Richard Devetak, Anthony Burke and Jim George's *An Introduction to International Relations: Australian Perspectives* (2007), also published by Cambridge University Press.

Three further points should be made about how we have approached Australian politics in this book. First, *Australian politics is understood broadly*. As the chapters in Part II show, politics is all around us in our everyday lives. Non-institutional and informal politics are discussed, along with more formalised and institutionally based politics. Where appropriate, consideration is given to local and state politics as well as national politics. Connections between Australian domestic politics and international developments are also highlighted. Some chapters, by virtue of their topics, focus more heavily on national and institutional politics than others; however, a central goal of the book is to suggest ways in which different aspects of Australian politics might be connected.

The breadth of this book is indicated by its 32 chapters, arranged in six parts. The book is structured to begin with the theories, questions and issues that will be most familiar to students (and other readers) and to lead them to more complex understandings. Thus Part I begins with democratic theory, then institutional theory, and so on. These theories, rather than others, have been chosen because they are the ones that students are likely to encounter in their wider reading on politics. They are discussed primarily as explanatory rather than normative theories. Thus the discussion of democratic theory focuses on the capacity of different democratic theories to explain Australian politics. Part II covers the politics that students already will have experienced, to at least some extent, in their everyday lives (although they may not have recognised them as 'political'). It provides new material and explanations to build a better understanding of those political experiences. Part III focuses on elections, that part of formal Australian politics that looms largest in most citizens' lives. Part IV examines other forms of citizen participation and representation between elections, before Part V takes students into the less familiar territory of state institutions and practices (parliament, the executive, bureaucracy, courts and federalism). Finally, Part VI combines elements from Parts I through V to promote greater understanding of issues that students have already encountered in the media and public discussion.

Second, the book focuses on *contemporary* theories, debates, controversies and issues in Australian politics, explaining these by reference to earlier material where this is necessary to assist understanding and explanation. It provides an overview of current research in Australian

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political science, pointing to new developments and debates. Third, to the extent that the book contains basic material on aspects of Australian politics, the authors have presented this material in ways that link it to debates, controversies and issues within Australian and international political science. The chapters in Parts II to VI engage with and draw on the competing theories discussed in Part I, making connections between more specific evidence, and debates and wider theories discussed there. The discussions of specific current issues in Part VI will make connections with the discussions of political institutions, forces and practices found in Parts II to V.

While there are already a number of texts catering for students undertaking Australian politics units of study (and the editors have all written and/or edited such texts), this is the only current text that provides a truly broad, analytical overview of key Australian political theories, practices and issues. This book is designed to be a comprehensive text on Australian politics, one that will provide a bridge to take students from basic to more complex and sophisticated understandings of this important area. We hope that it generates debate, disagreement and new trains of thought about Australian politics among its readers.