Power Without Results

Why Republicans Have Little to Show for their Takeover of American State Governments

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In the past quarter-century, the Republican Party has made significant inroads in American state governments. But the party’s widespread gains in state legislative and executive elections during the presidential administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama have been met with only limited success in changing state policy direction. Despite a more conservative and ascendant national party, Republican-controlled state governments have not reduced the size or scope of state governments, reversed the liberal gains of their Democratic predecessors, or enacted a new policy agenda that advances conservative values and goals.

The proposed book explains Republicans’ limited success in translating their electoral gains into policy victories as a product of inherent challenges facing conservative parties worldwide as well as the dependence of U.S. states on federal policy and national economic trends. Rather than critique Republicans’ values, policy goals, or proposals, the book evaluates conservative policy gains and results based on their own objectives. It uses copious data on American state policy outputs and socioeconomic outcomes to track changing state policies and their impacts, while integrating 25-year qualitative reviews of policymaking in all 50 states as well as compiling policy evaluations on all major Republican initiatives.

Proposed Chapters:

1. Leviathan’s Resilience

Merging research on American party politics and American federalism with the literature on comparative welfare states, I apply historical institutionalist theory to explain significant institutional and political roadblocks to conservative policymaking in the American states.

2. The Rise of Republican Rule

I track 25 years of Republican gains in state legislative and statewide elections, showing that they have extended beyond the South and produced more conservative state governments.

3. The Stickiness of Policy Liberalism

Using aggregate longitudinal measures of state policy liberalism and state budget and tax policies, I find that Republican gains in the states have only slightly altered state policy outputs, even though cross-sectional models imply large effects of Republican rule. Conservative gains in policy outputs arise mostly from gaining control of one legislative chamber or the governorship.

4. State Policy Revolutions, Republican and Otherwise

I track the specific areas where Republican policy gains have been most successful, such as abortion restrictions and electoral rules changes, as well as the many areas where non-partisan economic, social, and federal policy trends have made more of a difference nationwide.

5. Conservative Policy Dilemmas in Action

I content analyze qualitative histories of policymaking in all 50 states from 1992-2017, tracking success and failure of major Republican proposals. The stories focus on Republican Governors’ dilemmas in addressing federal policy, electoral incentives, and state economic competition.

6. The Missing Results of Republican Policies

I compile policy evaluations of Republican-led policy changes in state governments since the 1990s. I find only minimal evidence that enacted policies, such as welfare reform or right-to-work, led to the significant results predicted by either proponents or opponents.

7. The Elusive Red State Model

I argue that few broad social or economic results are attributable to Republican policy gains in the states, finding no consistent red state strategy for addressing key policy issues or problems. Socioeconomic results are instead attributable to pre-existing and apolitical state differences.