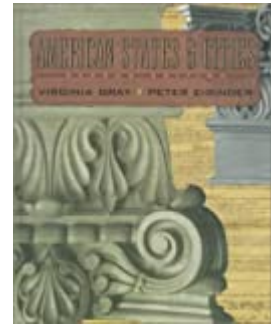


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Virginia Gray, Peter Eisinger.** *American States and Cities*. New York and New York: Longman, 1997. xv + 495 pp. \$57.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-673-52461-4.



**W. B. Stouffer, Cynthia Opheim, Susan Bland Day.** *State and Local Politics: the Individual and the Governments*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. xxii + 553 pp. \$42.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-673-99661-9.

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## New in State and Local Texts

These two texts represent a new generation in the genre for classroom use, though it should be said from the start that they are very different books. As in the earlier editions the authors, in both instances, shrug off the bells and whistles so oddly and sometimes unpleasantly displayed in many of the standard American "introductory" entries of the last few years, choosing to concentrate on a rather more "nuts and bolts" approach.

Both texts cover the standard material rather well, though their internal arrangement is somewhat different. Gray and Eisinger have divided their commentary into six sections: "The Setting," "Political Organizations," "State Government Institutions," "Local Government Institutions," "Public Policy," and finally a prescriptive/projective chapter entitled "The Future." While the main headings are somewhat intuitive, what appears to be lacking is the notion of linkage between the various institutions at both the state and local levels. This text still

includes the old "party in government, party in the electorate, party organizations" division, which is somewhat surprising in view of Gray's excellent academic research into this arena. Gray and Eisinger have selected sidebars (called "boxes" by the publisher) with great care; these vignettes are far superior to those found in the Stouffer et al. text, though in both books these suffer from passing relevance (Gray and Eisinger include, for example, a box dating from 1986 on "Unfunded Mandates in Wisconsin"). As perhaps may be expected given the background of the primary author, the strongest portions of the Gray and Eisinger text are those that deal directly with state-level institutions. The section on interest groups is somewhat limited (it is folded into the larger picture of "political organizations"), but buttressed by unpublished research by Gray and David Lowery. The section on governors is particularly excellent.

Stouffer, Opheim, and Day have a slightly different

organizational approach, using standard chapter divisions. In addition to the expected sections on institutions, the authors devote a full chapter to public opinion and the media, which has merit in light of student preconceptions about these relationships. The strongest chapters here are those dealing with the interaction of state and local governing bodies, and the section on justice and crime is particularly well-written. One organizational feature of the Stouffer et al. work which is not found in the Gray and Eisinger text is the inclusion of “study objectives” and a simple glossary at the end of each chapter. While some instructors may find this an annoying addition, many students think them useful, and in Stouffer et al. they are not particularly intrusive and can be easily ignored if need be.

Both books suffer from that bane of the textbook—lack of immediacy. While it is not the purpose of this review to compare the old and new editions directly, it is clear that there is a good bit of carry-over from earlier editions. On one hand, there is new material: both books carry an examination of Willie Brown’s career as mayor of San Francisco. On the other hand, there are some rather jarringly dated pieces as well. A “Degree of Authority Granted to Local Government” table in the Stouffer et al. book (pp. 143-144) dates from an ACIR report of 1981 (in an era when the relationship between state and local authorities is changing rapidly, this is unfortunate); Gray and Eisinger’s electoral material is updated through 1994, but much of the information in the chapters on taxing and spending in local governments dates back to the early 1990s.

That textbooks carry an agenda of their own is not a new observation, but the degree to which this is carried forward in the Gray and Eisinger text is sometimes disconcerting. In laying out their central thesis in the introduction, the authors bluntly inform the reader that “Congress and the President (have been deprived of) the ability to lead” (Gray and Eisinger, p. xiii) and that “by century’s end, it is likely that the states, and not Washington, will be responsible for...social services for the poor, some food assistance for the hungry, and Medicaid” (Gray and Eisinger, p. xiii). These assertions are neither examined thoroughly, nor supported empirically in the work at hand. While a careful reader of the literature might simply ignore them in the course of study, introductory students may not be as discerning. There are dangerous assertions buried in the text as well; a look into the section dealing with counties reveals the authors’ contention that “(c)ounties and municipalities have some differences, but the line between these two

types of local government is fast disappearing” (Gray and Eisinger, p. 236). This may even be the case, but if it is, why not demonstrate it, drop the section on counties, and simply collapse it into the section on municipalities?

In part, the Gray and Eisinger book suffers from its own sophisticated level of discourse—having a clear scholarly agenda (albeit unsupported in some instances) is not a problem usually associated with textbooks. The authors deserve some credit for attempting to bring their own complex arguments within the reach of undergraduates by placing it in this forum, but introducing them without the elaborate set of empirical tests required to do them justice may hamstring this effort.

On the other hand, the Stouffer, Opheim and Day book suffers from no such problems of sophistication, in some ways, rather the reverse. For example, its treatment of such complex subjects as community organizations among interest groups is reduced to a single paragraph (Stouffer et al., p. 231); this kind of unwarranted brevity is simply not found in the Gray and Eisinger text. Despite the fact that in actual length the Stouffer et al. book is somewhat longer, the Gray and Eisinger book clearly has a higher specific gravity (in the scholarly sense). Nonetheless, there is something to be said for simplicity in a textbook, and the Stouffer et al. text is easy to read, easy to follow, and contains most of the salient points expected in such a book.

Because of the unusual approach used by Gray and Eisinger, I cannot in good conscience recommend it as a “starter kit” for an introductory course. The arguments are often too complex, and the authors assume a level of sophistication that may not be present at the mean of freshmen undergraduate knowledge. In courses taught at the upper undergraduate levels, it may find a niche for instructors who find a basic text useful at that level. The Stouffer et al. book is more appropriate to its audience—first- and second-year undergraduates—and may be an appropriate text to accompany some higher level courses where no prior experience with the subject is assumed. My own inclination would be to use the Stouffer et al. text as a basic textbook, and use another Virginia Gray project, the excellent reader *Politics in the American States* (Virginia Gray, Herbert Jacob and Robert B. Albritton, sixth edition, HarperCollins, 1995) as adjunct reading material to the course. In this way a happy medium can be reached between the simple, straightforward, uncolored documentation of the Stouffer et al. book and the more scholarly, but somewhat controversial approach found in the Gray and Eisinger text.

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