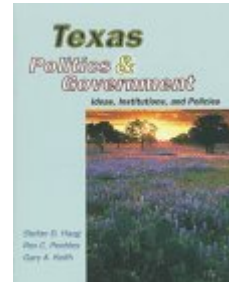


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stefan D. Haag, Rex C. Peebles, Gary A. Keith. *Texas Politics and Government: Ideas, Institutions, and Policies.* New York City: Longman, 1997. xxiv + 632 pp. \$38.68 (paper), ISBN 978-0-673-99768-5.



Reviewed by R. Bruce Anderson (Auburn University)

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Readers outside the Lone Star State may be somewhat puzzled as to the range and number of books on Texas politics that have emerged over the past few years. The reason is relatively simple—a course in Texas politics is required by law for any student graduating from a state-supported university in Texas, of which there are dozens. Many of the books coming out recently (see Tannahill's *Texas Politics* and Stouffer, Opheim and Day's *State and Local Politics*) have been authored by those “in the trenches”—authors teaching in community colleges and two-year institutions. These texts have often met with little attention, for the most part, outside their authors' home institutions. This is unfortunate as they are usually the product of years of teaching experience and experimentation, and often rise far above the usual textbook output.

The present case is also a product of the Texas community college system—in this case Austin's—and reflects a depth of classroom experience too little seen in textbooks in the field generally. The authors are clearly drawing on “what works for us” in their courses. The constraints of the community college classroom are a mixed blessing. Due to the wide range of student abilities found in these schools, any text materials must meet the minimum requirements of clarity and easy understanding. On the other hand, many of these books tend toward the simplistic in dealing with complex issues and

connections and as a result sometimes tend to read like McGuffey's politics readers. But this is not true in the case at hand. Haag, Peebles and Keith's volume is in the best tradition of the stripped down, well organized, classroom oriented textbook with few major surprises, good or evil. Each section is easily followed, and from the point of view of the instructor, easily organized into lectures. The writing—not usually one of the things one notices about textbooks—is unusually good, and at times reveals a sense of humor and perspective almost entirely missing from similar works.

The authors use a cultural framework based on what they call a “Texan Creed,” which grows out of a core set of ideas developed during the 19th century. This creed is centered on variants of five ideas: individualism, liberty, equality, democracy and constitutionalism. Further, eschewing the textbook norm of mapping almost everything onto a unidimensional scale of liberal and conservative ideologies (which is particularly absurd for Texas) the authors have widened this to include populism and libertarianism—as befits study of one of the more individualistic political environments.

Each chapter begins with what the authors call a “chapter scenario” which is a story or anecdote from Texas politics. This is generally followed by the bulk of the chapter. Included in each section are “profiles” of people or events in Texas politics in historical or con-

temporary perspective (I particularly liked the piece on Nancy “Napalm” Palm, the Republican party activist of the 1960s and 1970s) and a quasi-article called a “reading” which (with mixed success) attempts to provide a reader-aspect to the text. More interesting and useful than these is the section of each chapter which attempts to place Texas in a state comparative context (called the *Texas Index*).

On the negative side, the maps and graphs are generally of poor quality and sometimes erratic content: one puzzling map (pp. 134-5) denotes Harris county (county of the City of Houston, and home to longtime Democratic officeholders and liberal activists Craig Washington and Sheila Jackson Lee) as an entirely Republican county. The “look” of the book is somewhat dreary; it uses throughout a pale, nasty institutional sepia-pink for all of its borders, headings and maps. Perhaps this is the price we pay (or

do not pay) for its unlikely price. Further, the strength of the book in its readability far outweighs any concern one might have over the occasional design flaw.

Generally speaking, this book covers all of the bases for a basic course in Texas politics and in some ways surpasses the mean to the point of having interest outside the state as well. Among the current books on Texas politics in this market, it clearly leads the pack for simplicity of organization and directness. I feel quite comfortable recommending this book for use in classrooms in Texas—and in state politics survey courses which might include Texas as apart of a comparative array.

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