



William Lyons, John M. Scheb II, Billy Stair. *Government and Politics in Tennessee.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001. x + 478 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57233-141-9; \$45.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-57233-140-2.



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Politics and Government: Tennessee-Style

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Americans in general have much more contact with state government—when they pay sales taxes, register their automobiles, or attend public universities, for example—than with the federal government. Still, most citizens know much more about the U.S. Constitution and the three branches of government that it establishes than about the structure and operation of their own states. The authors of this volume have set out to rectify that situation, at least for Tennesseans and others interested in the Volunteer State. University of Tennessee political scientists William Lyons and John M. Scheb II along with veteran state official Billy Stair provide a comprehensive examination of the political system of Tennessee in a volume that can only be described as part textbook, part reference book, and part scholarly interpretation. Focusing primarily on the institutions of state government, as well as recent Tennessee politics and public policy, this book provides a wealth of information for historians, political scientists, journalists, and general readers.

Lyons and his colleagues begin with an introductory section on the foundations of the political system. In the

opening chapter, the authors provide a cursory analysis of the state's historical evolution through the Civil War and Reconstruction period, and then devote most of their attention to the impact of religion, race, and recent economic developments on Tennessee political life. Although they note the persistence of regionalism, as manifested in the historic distinctions among East, Middle, and West Tennessee, the authors speculate that these divisions may be losing some of their importance, as rural, urban, and suburban identities take hold. A chapter on the state constitution highlights Tennessee's important, but oft-neglected, constitutional history. Tennessee was one of only two states in the Old South that granted voting rights to free blacks, until the Constitution of 1835 ended this practice, and the state constitution has long contained a number of rights not explicitly stated in the U.S. Constitution. The Tennessee Constitution's Declaration of Rights includes a prohibition on state-run monopolies, protection against imprisonment for debt, and protection against being compelled to bear arms. Among Tennessee's other constitutional peculiarities are state officials—treasurer, comptroller, and secretary of state—who are elected by the legislature, a state at-

torney general who is chosen by the supreme court, and a complicated amending process that relies on legislative initiative rather than grass-roots action. These introductory chapters succeed in providing general background on Tennessee's political and constitutional system.

The next, and lengthiest, section of the book examines the major governmental institutions in Tennessee: the legislature, executive branch, judiciary, and bureaucracy. Here the authors characterize the Tennessee General Assembly as exhibiting "relative legislative harmony" and "nonpartisan conservatism" (pp. 65, 67). Because it is the most demographically homogenous state in the South (only 16 percent of Tennessee's population is black, the lowest in the eleven states of the old Confederacy), the authors contend, Tennessee has generally avoided rancorous partisanship in its legislature, as most legislators value fiscal conservatism and bipartisan cooperation. Lyons and his colleagues also attribute the relative lack of conflict to the state's extraordinary continuity of leadership. For the past three decades John Wilder has served as speaker of the Senate, while Ned McWherter served fourteen years as House speaker followed by eight years as governor. In their chapter on the role of the governor—and in the book as a whole—the authors pay particular attention to Tennessee's three most recent chief executives, Lamar Alexander, McWherter, and Don Sundquist. Over the past few decades, the authors demonstrate, the office has undergone many changes, as governors have become increasingly involved with luring economic development projects to the state and raising money for political campaigns. Woven throughout these interpretive insights are the bland details one would expect to find in any state handbook: information about the operation of the legislative committee system, descriptions of various regulatory agencies, and an outline of the state court structure. While this section of the book does not always make for interesting reading, on the whole, the authors effectively explain the recent operation of Tennessee government.

In a section entitled "Tennessee Politics," Lyons and his co-authors cover such topics as parties, interest groups, public opinion, elections, and the news media. Here the authors delve briefly into the state's history, in order to show the development of political parties from the early nineteenth century to the present. Much of their discussion, though, focuses on the recent success of Republicans in the state. In 1994, Tennesseans elected Republicans Don Sundquist as governor and Bill Frist as U.S. Senator, and two years later voters re-elected the state's other U.S. senator, Fred Thompson, also a Re-

publican. These developments mirrored public opinion surveys during the 1990s, which indicated that increasing numbers of Tennesseans identified themselves as conservatives. Given the national electoral success of the Republican Party in 1994, the authors caution against reading too much into these electoral victories, and they conclude that Tennessee is very much a competitive two-party state. Astonishingly, the authors neglect to discuss the defeat of Al Gore in Tennessee in the 2000 presidential race, even though the book clearly appeared well after the state results were known. (The authors take account of the 2000 election with regard to the state lottery and they make reference to legislative action regarding the lottery that occurred in February 2001.) Gore's defeat in Tennessee stands as a significant milestone in state politics, as the former vice president became one of only a handful of presidential candidates ever to lose his home state. This profoundly significant event in Tennessee political history merits some explanation.

The last major section of the book examines public policy, and the authors focus most of their attention on education, corrections, and taxation. Unlike most of the rest of the work, which is written in almost a textbook tone, the authors here seem more willing to make their views known. Lyons and his colleagues recount recent educational reform efforts in the state, particularly Governor Alexander's controversial proposal to provide merit pay for teachers, and Governor McWherter's shifting of more responsibilities and resources to local school boards. In a particularly insightful chapter, the authors take recent governors to task for failing to deal with the state's corrections crisis. Describing prison reform as "the issue nobody wants," the authors lament recent policies that have focused on incarcerating more criminals without providing the necessary funding for new and improved facilities (p. 330). Most disturbing, the authors assert, "is how the obsession with numbers has largely eliminated the human factor from the policy dialogue" (p. 350). With great passion, Lyons and his co-authors recommend that policymakers take into account the "thousands of human beings" in Tennessee prisons when considering such issues as sentence credits, early release, and mandatory sentencing (p. 350). Finally, the authors tackle the most controversial of all recent issues, namely financing state government, by clearly coming down on the side of a state income tax. Although acknowledging the political sacrifice that lawmakers would make to enact such a measure, the authors portray Tennessee's reliance on the sales tax as regressive and inadequate to fund the state's future needs, especially in the

area of education.

Overall this work, written in a clear and accessible style, serves as a valuable introduction to politics and government in Tennessee. The volume does contain a few errors. In an early chapter, the authors more than once refer to the state's antebellum-era free black population as "free slaves," and they incorrectly state that Walter Mondale ran for president in 1980, rather than 1984 (p. 261). Perhaps, moreover, Lyons and his colleagues should have devoted more attention to Edward H. "Boss"

Crump, who dominated Memphis and state politics for nearly half a century, and Willie Herenton, whose historic election as mayor of Memphis in 1991 marked the first time an African American had been elected to that position. (Herenton's almost certain re-election this year to a fourth consecutive term will make him the longest-serving mayor in Memphis history.) Still, these are relatively minor criticisms. Lyons, Scheb, and Stair provide a wealth of information in this work and, particularly in their discussion of public policy, give their readers much to consider.

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