



The Path of American Public Policy: Comparative Perspectives

Anne Marie Cammisa, Paul Christopher Manuel

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Among all the worlds' democracies, the American system of government is perhaps the most self-conscious about preventing majority tyranny. The American constitutional system is predicated on an inherent ideational and institutional tension dating back to the foundation of the nation in the eighteenth century, which constrains innovative policy development. Namely, the framers designed a system that simultaneously seeks to protect the rights of the minority out of power and provide for majority rule. These opposing goals are based on the idea that limiting governmental power will guarantee individual liberty.

The Path of American Public Policy: Comparative Perspectives asks how this foundational tension might limit the range of options available to American policy makers. What does the resistance to change in Washington teach us about the American system of checks and balances? Why is it so difficult (though not impossible) to make sweeping policy changes in the United States? How could things be different? What would be the implications for policy formation if the United States adopted a British-style parliamentary system?

To examine these questions, this book gives an example of when comprehensive change failed (the 1994 Contract with America) and when it succeeded (the 2010 Affordable Care Act). A comparison of the two cases sheds light on how and why Obama's health care was shepherded to law under Nancy Pelosi, while Newt Gingrich was less successful with the Contract with America. The contrast between the two cases highlights the balance between majority rule and minority rights, and how the foundational tension constrains public-policy formation. While 2010 illustrates an exception to the rule about comprehensive policy change in the United States, the 1994 is an apt example of how our system of checks and balances usually works to stymie expansive, far-reaching legislative initiatives.

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