

Chapter One

American Politics in the Long Run

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OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY, government and politics in the United States have been transformed—so much so that a Rip van Winkle who fell asleep in 1957 and awoke in 2007 would hardly feel it was the same polity. Even as America has achieved a new if troubled hegemony in international relations, at home the national government has become directly and indirectly active in an unprecedentedly broad array of realms. Matters that were once the exclusive purview of state and local governments and private actors are now shaped in Washington. Political parties and voluntary institutions have also been reorganized, and citizen attachments to politics have shifted in dramatic ways. Amid all of this, partisan and ideological balances have been upended. In the 1960s and early 1970s, liberals and Democrats briefly held sway, prompting federal activism on behalf of citizen rights and economic regulation. Subsequently, conservatives successfully mobilized people and ideas to counter liberal practices and limit—or, more often, refocus and redirect—activist government.

This book aims to probe these profound domestic political changes and their consequences. By taking a long-term perspective, we make visible large-scale transformations that too often disappear in narrower short-term studies of American politics. In doing so, we depart from those who believe that everything changed in domestic politics following September 11, 2001. The tragic, unanticipated attacks of that day certainly had important partisan effects—initially strengthening the presidency of George W. Bush and enhancing the sway of conservative Republicans. For a time, these events tipped what had been a closely balanced electorate toward the right. In specific policy areas, such as civil liberties and intelligence gathering, reactions to 9/11 spurred new departures. Nevertheless, in many areas of domestic politics, the main effect of 9/11 was to speed up and reinforce political tendencies long underway. Playing out over several decades, not just in a few months or years, several intertwined transformations have remade politics and governance in our time. Current political realities must be situated in the broader context of these gradual but profound changes.

To start with the greatest change of the contemporary era—notwithstanding Bill Clinton’s famous assertion to the contrary—a persistent “era

of big government” commenced in the 1960s. This transformation involved significant expansions in the scope and scale of federal government activity, comparable in importance to earlier expansions in the era of the New Deal and World War II. Social spending grew significantly. In many realms, standards of social provision were nationalized. The scope of the regulatory state increased dramatically in areas such as consumer, environmental, and worker protection. A “rights revolution” pursued by Congress, the federal bureaucracy, and the courts led to a greatly broadened set of entitlements for particular categories of citizens, such as minorities, women, and the disabled (Skrentny 2002). Here again, authority shifted to Washington, as matters that had once been resolved in diverse ways (for good or ill) at the local or state level became subject to more uniform national practice. Finally, a “hidden welfare state” of subsidies provided through the tax code became an increasingly important if still largely subterranean instrument of government activism (Howard 1997).

After the early 1980s, federal government expansion was slowed, even rolled back in some areas. Yet the activist state remains a central new fact of modern American politics (cf. McKinnon 2005). It is central in two respects. First, much contemporary political conflict focuses precisely on the role of the activist state. Second, the rise of government activism has created a fundamentally new landscape for political action in the United States, spurring changes in the media, Congress, electoral politics, and interest groups.

A second major transformation in our time has been the emergence of a powerful—and, in some ways, radical—conservative movement. Conservative elites mobilized in large part to counter new forms of federal activism. They confronted liberal policies that had become embedded not just in government but also in a range of surrounding institutions, from the media to the educational system. Even when spearheaded by liberals, institutional reforms and reorganizations in Congress and the rest of the polity ended up opening new opportunities for groups inside and beyond government aiming to advance conservative agendas. Over several decades, social and economic conservatives in and around the Republican Party have made steady headway. Conservatives have channeled popular participation for social causes, linking newly energized associations and networks to partisan politics. They have dominated agendas of public debate over the economy. Despite important limits on what they have so far achieved in public policy, conservatives have been able to trim and shift taxes and federal regulations, preclude major new social policy initiatives, and limit increases in direct, highly visible social expenditures for working-age Americans.

Our investigations of these ongoing political conflicts have convinced us that these two profound changes in American politics—the rise of the activist state and the resurgence of conservatism—cannot be fully understood absent consideration of a third: the redefinition of modes of citizen participation. As the scope of government expanded and new technologies of communication emerged, shifts occurred in the structure of key organizations that linked citizens and the state. Party competition spread to the South. In an era of money-driven campaigns and partisan discord, political parties restructured themselves and differentially targeted various subgroups of citizens (Schier 2000). Disparities of electoral participation have grown, as the old participate more than the young, and the economically privileged and highly educated have increased their advantage over the middle strata and the poor (Campbell 2003; Freeman 2004). The character of voluntary organizations changed as well. Activist federal courts, bureaucrats, and congressional staffers offered new access to lawyers and experts, spurring the professionalization of associations and a turn away from attempts to mobilize active memberships. This shift occurred sooner and more thoroughly on the liberal side of the spectrum, while conservatives perceived different political challenges and opportunities from the 1960s to the 1980s and engaged in more citizen mobilization, at least for a time. Meanwhile, federal subsidies encouraged state and local governments to contract with nonprofit agencies to deliver social services—and this, in turn, spurred the proliferation of professionally managed nonprofits, which have displaced membership entities in many local communities (Berry and Arons 2003, chap. 1; Crenson and Ginsberg 2002).

In many ways, contemporary American politics reflects the ongoing collision, carried out through these new forms of participation, between the rise of the activist state and the emergence of an invigorated conservatism. Conservatives have certainly not destroyed or fundamentally rolled back big, activist government. They have, however, circumscribed and redirected it, upending many of the assumptions made by liberals, who were briefly hegemonic back in the 1960s. Conservatives, moreover, have regularly proved more adept than liberals at using the new institutional and organizational levers available to politically active groups. As we learn throughout this book about changes in civic organizations, political parties, congressional rules, and electoral processes, we will see that these changes have often advantaged conservatives. Partisans have shaped transformations in the organizations and institutions of American politics, but the effects have not always been as the originally influential intended. Repeatedly over the past half century, liberals and Democrats spearheaded organizational, institutional, and policy changes that have ended up helping conservatives and Republicans in surprising ways.

STUDYING POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Describing and exploring the intertwined transformations that have remade the face of American governance and politics in our time necessitated that our contributors depart from the styles of analysis prevalent in much academic research. Scholars have produced thousands of books and articles on this or that aspect of contemporary politics. Much of this scholarship, however, is biased toward the short term, examines circumscribed arenas of politics in isolation from one another, and tends to abstract away from the substance of political battles and trends. By focusing instead on long-term, large-scale changes in the U.S. polity—and by considering the relations among goal-directed movements, changing institutions, and substantively redirected policymaking—we endeavor to overcome such biases.

Beyond Short-Term Slices

Consider, to start, what is lost through a preoccupation with short-term processes. All too often, studies of American politics examine only immediate cause-and-effect relationships—such as the impact of quarterly shifts in economic growth percentages on presidential approval ratings, or the effect of a specific election on partisan margins in Congress. Important as such immediate links may be, to focus on them may distract us from structural tendencies and emerging processes (Pierson 2004; Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Some important political developments happen only gradually, yet are profoundly important for shaping and reshaping the terrain on which immediate shifts occur. Tracing institutional, ideological, and organizational patterns over long stretches of time allows us to avoid being mesmerized by event-driven zigs and zags.

Contributors to this volume illustrate the value of tracing long-term transformations and teasing out the (often unexpected) consequences of sustained trends or earlier institutional changes. Nolan McCarty, for example, demonstrates why, over the long run, heightened partisan polarization in U.S. politics has led via legislative stasis to de facto conservative results in a number of important areas of domestic social policy. Andrea Campbell traces sea changes in political parties, electoral mobilization, and voter blocs, not just from one election to the next, but over the course of decades. Her analysis brings structural and strategic changes into view, sharpening our sense of how Democrats and Republicans have shifted their operations and their alignments since the middle of the twentieth century. And Julian Zelizer shows how institutional reforms in Congress, originally spearheaded by liberals in the 1970s, eventually created levers

that could be more effectively used by aggressive conservatives—first to undermine moderate Republican and liberal Democratic leadership in Congress and then to consolidate partisan discipline under the leadership of conservative Republicans.

Equally important, long-term analysis allows scholars to trace the efforts of goal-driven political actors engaged in learning, adaptation, and organization building. To take seriously the rise of a new ideological tendency or social movement, for example, is to examine interconnected sets of actors pursuing meaningful goals over time. Inevitably, these are stories of the long haul; they are not stories well captured by “snapshots” of each moment or round of politics in isolation. In this volume, Steven Teles argues that the strategic attempts of conservatives to undo or modify entrenched liberal policies and institutional projects must be understood as deliberate, long-term efforts playing out across a range of institutional domains. Forward-looking actors—organizationally situated and interconnected groups with the willingness and capacity to take a very long view—proceeded through practices of trial-and-error. In both Teles’ and Hacker and Pierson’s analyses, the rise of conservatism emerges as a set of important but largely subterranean processes moving through several decades of what might otherwise seem disconnected activities.

Of course, that actors sometimes take the long view does not mean they always get things right. On the contrary, in a complex, interdependent, and rapidly shifting world they will often get things wrong. To look at long-term transformations is to take seriously the possibility that important elements of political life will be unintended or unanticipated by powerful actors—and to treat this obvious truth as an integral element of social inquiry rather than just an inconvenient complication. Time and again, we find that political interventions have unexpected results—what was thought to be trivial turns out to be important, and what was expected to produce one effect turns out to do something altogether different.

A final advantage of long-term analyses is that they allow scholars to highlight not just how politics makes policies but also how policies, once enacted, can change further political struggles. As contemporary theorizing and research about “policy feedbacks” shows, policies can influence elite and mass understandings of political issues and possibilities; policies can change governmental capacities to propose and implement subsequent policy changes; and policies can influence the identity and goals of organized groups that get involved in subsequent rounds of policymaking (Mettler and Soss 2004; Pierson 1993; Skocpol 1992). Ideas about policy feedbacks are deployed by contributors to this volume to help make sense of contemporary political transformations. The advantages of tracing policy feedbacks over the long term are especially visible in the chapters by Suzanne Mettler, Theda Skocpol, and Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson.

The Stuff of Politics

Beyond the preoccupation with the short term, another unfortunate bias that pervades much current research on U.S. politics—including studies that do attempt to track changes over considerable periods of time—is excessive abstraction from the substance of political conflicts. For example, analysts may study trends in legislative “productivity” by counting the number of major laws Congress passed each year, treating each of them as analytically equivalent (cf. Howell et al. 2000; Mayhew 1991). Or analysts may count broad types of issues that appear in the media or congressional hearings in different periods (cf. Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Talbert and Potoski 2002) without considering the partisan or ideological content of the various topics tallied. Hoping to achieve generalizations about the American political system by assembling large data sets susceptible to quantitative description or statistical analysis, scholars look for repeated instances countable as “the same thing.”

Although the search for generalization and efforts to build large data sets are admirable, proceeding at such a high level of abstraction comes at a price. Much of the meaning of politics is lost when the actual content and partisan valence of political struggles is squeezed out of the analysis. Politicians, interest groups, and social movements are, after all, contending about the direction of policies. They typically care intensely about the precise content of government activity (or inactivity). The accumulation of successes and failures in such substantive struggles can add up to fundamental shifts in what government undertakes, and the capacities of political coalitions to shape agendas and command public support. Studies that rest content with counting sheer volumes of legislation or mentions of a broad type of issue in the media may illuminate some issues, yet miss other equally or more important aspects of political change.

Contributors to this volume adopt two strategies to bring the content of politics front and center. Some authors examine ongoing struggles about the direction and structure of particular types of public policies, using this as a way to trace larger shifts in the American polity. Concentration on substantive policy lineages helps analysts to stay focused on “where the action is”—even as the locus of that action shifts. Most scholarship on American politics focuses on a specific site or mode of political activity, but the analysis should not stop when the venue shifts. Struggles over policy directions proceed not just in Congress but also in the media, the electoral system, and interest-group struggles—at a given point in time different venues may be most important. Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, for example, examine the shifting politics of tax cuts, dissecting legislative processes, interest-group maneuvers, and battles in primary elections. And Suzanne Mettler traces the shifting political effects of social policies

during an era in which visible social expenditures have been displaced in many areas by less-visible tax credits and loan subsidies. How has this shift affected citizens' understandings of the role of government in their lives and their proclivities for civic engagement?

In addition to following policy lineages with careful attention to the content and substantive political impact, contributors to this volume place a high priority on understanding the developing activities of political organizations and looser social movements. Because political groupings care about affecting the substance of government activity and the character of ongoing political life, they are often flexible about adapting their strategies and tactics to changing challenges and opportunities that arise in various venues. Tracking these adaptations is an excellent way to identify and understand broader shifts in the political environment. Theda Skocpol's analysis of the increasingly elite-oriented character of American civic organizations, Steve Teles' explorations of the evolving strategies of conservatives in various institutional domains, and Mark Smith's dissection of the growing success of conservative organizations in shaping debates about American economic performance all employ this core strategy. By examining goal-oriented political actors maneuvering in changing contexts, contributors to this volume shed considerable light on aspects of the political process that are important but poorly grasped by more static and abstract attempts to study American politics.

LOOKING AHEAD

Although every chapter in this book helps us to understand government expansion, policy shifts, and the rise of contemporary conservatism—and each chapter makes connections to the ideas and arguments of other chapters—the contributions are grouped into three major parts, dealing in turn with macroscopic reorganizations of the state and political organizations; the rise of contemporary conservatism; and the political roots and effects of public policy trends. To give a sense of what is to come, we can preview the issues taken up in each part and its constituent chapters.

The Shifting Political Landscape

Taking a bird's-eye view of developments over half a century, part I focuses on the changing structure of the U.S. macro polity. Paul Pierson, Theda Skocpol, and Andrea Campbell probe the rise of the activist state and accompanying reorganizations in the universe of interest groups and voluntary associations and in the electoral system and party politics.

To set the stage for the book as a whole, Paul Pierson's chapter on "The Rise and Reconfiguration of Activist Government" brings together evidence on how national government activities expanded in the United States from the 1960s into the 1980s and assesses the ways in which modalities as well as levels of government action shifted over time. The expanding scope of government activities, surges in legislation, trends in government employment, and shifting patterns of regulation and national and subnational expenditures—are all explored, as the late twentieth-century rise in government activism is put in broader historical perspective as a critical episode in U.S. state building.

The expansion of federal activity, Pierson documents, was rapid, large, and broad-based. Whether one looks at spending, social regulation, the entrenchment of social rights, or the deployment of tax subsidies, government activism grew. In some cases, this transformation entailed federal and state activity growing in tandem. In others, such as the "rights revolution," it represented a clear transfer of political authority from localities to Washington. Either way, this marked shift in the character of the national state had lasting effects on political conflict and political organization, as both supporters and opponents of the activist state scrambled to adapt to new opportunities and constraints.

Indeed, changes in the scope and modalities of federal government activities have affected—and, in turn, have been affected by—changes in U.S. interest groups and voluntary associations. In "Government Activism and the Reorganization of American Civic Democracy," Theda Skocpol shows that between the 1960s and the 1990s, the balance of nationally visible groups shifted away from business representation and popularly rooted membership associations and toward professionally managed organizations advocating an unprecedentedly wide variety of public causes. During the same period, blue-collar trade unions also declined, and nonprofit institutions proliferated. "Rights revolutions" and the expansion of higher education helped to spur civic reorganization, yet new degrees and kinds of federal government activism were also critical, because they affected group identities, interest stakes, and organizing resources and offered new venues of access to professional staffers and nonprofit social service providers.

Civic changes were politically uneven, however. They occurred sooner and more pervasively on the liberal side of the spectrum. Conservatives—who felt marginalized during the 1965–80 period—continued or reinvented many cross-class, popularly rooted associations in and around the edges of an increasingly populist and conservative Republican Party, especially by tapping into evangelical church networks. In addition to exploring the roots of uneven civic transformations, this chapter also suggests some of the most important consequences of contemporary civic shifts for

inequalities in democratic participation, partisan polarization, and public policymaking.

Paralleling Skocpol's examination of the reorganization of U.S. civic life, Andrea Campbell examines "Parties, Electoral Participation, and Shifting Voting Blocs" since the 1960s. A series of technological, institutional, legal, and cultural changes have reshaped the role and placement of the major parties in the U.S. electoral system. Parties were once broad-based mobilizers of the public, providing the manpower to run labor-intensive political campaigns and appealing to voters with emotional and social ties. From the 1960s, however, advances in communications and reforms of the nomination system led to the rise of candidate-centered elections; and the political parties reconfigured themselves as providers of services to candidates. As parties lost their grass-roots ties to voters and increasingly targeted high-turnout-prone and more affluent citizens, electoral politics functioned to exacerbate political inequality.

And the two parties have fared differently. The Republican Party more quickly and adroitly adapted and expanded its organizational and fundraising capacities. What is more, the Democrats became associated with a variety of "new politics" groups, ceding populist arguments to the Republicans, who came to be seen as defenders of the middle class. As a result, Democrats lost ground among many pivotal electoral groups, including white men, southerners, Catholics, and evangelical Protestants. In perhaps the most vivid expression of the ascendance of an energized conservative movement in American politics, the Republican Party after 2000 controlled the presidency, both chambers of Congress, and a majority of governorships and state legislatures—a complete reversal of the circumstances of 1964.

Conservatives on the Rise

Part II focuses especially on the long-term activities of conservative elites, tracing their goal-directed maneuvers across various arenas of U.S. politics. As Julian Zelizer, Mark Smith, and Steven Teles reveal, each in his own way, inside and beyond the institutions of government, conservative elites have made remarkable headway in recent decades.

In "Seizing Power: Conservatives and Congress since the 1970s," Julian Zelizer probes the unintended consequences of institutional shifts in the U.S. Congress. Through a series of rules changes and reorganizations in the larger polity in the 1960s and 1970s, Congress moved from an era of committee dominance to an era of multiplying subcommittees, greater openness of operations, and possibilities for more disciplined party leadership. Sponsored by liberals, who were then predominant, shifts in rules and norms were intended to strengthen Congress's operations and reputa-

tion and promote liberal policy agendas. Yet something different happened. Institutional reforms in Congress ended up facilitating partisanship and scandal warfare, opening the way for mavericks and advocates of special or minority causes to attack congressional leaders.

Both liberal Democratic leaders and moderate Republican leaders found their sway in Congress challenged. As conservative movements gathered steam in the 1980s and 1990s, a new generation of Republican politicians proved surprisingly adept at using the new legislative rules and practices to their partisan and ideological advantage. Focusing on the House of Representatives in particular, the history presented in Zelizer's chapter also reveals ways in which congressional conservatives have had relatively limited success at curtailing the growth of the U.S. state. Congressional history since the 1960s has been defined by the tension between the political achievements of congressional conservatives and their policy shortfalls—namely, the endurance of a large, pervasive federal government in an era when the center of gravity in congressional and national politics moved to the right.

Like Zelizer's chapter, Mark Smith's "Economic Insecurity, Party Reputations, and the Republican Ascendance" analyzes the efforts of each party to adapt to changing circumstances. Smith focuses on the rise of economic insecurity following the end of the long post-war boom. Since the early 1970s economic issues have grown in significance for the American electorate, and Smith explores some of the crucial political results of this key development. He identifies a striking puzzle, noting that the GOP has gained a sizable and durable advantage in economic reputation among the electorate over the past thirty years, even though evidence suggests that economic performance has been weaker under Republican presidents.

Smith argues that Republicans have developed and sustained a more effective economic message. This effectiveness stems in part from the greater clarity and consistency of GOP demands for lower taxes and less regulation, and in part from the stronger organizational networks that supported and disseminated the Republican message. It also reflects Reagan's successful repositioning of the party to place greater priority on tax cuts, which in turn gradually led Democrats to emphasize the less effective message of deficit reduction.

The final chapter in part II, Steven Teles' exploration of "Conservative Mobilization against Entrenched Liberalism" offers yet another perspective on the rise of conservative elites and movements in our time. By the late 1970s, conservatives were surging in electoral politics, but wholly outgunned in institutional and policy realms beyond electoral politics. They faced old and new liberal ideals and practices that were thoroughly entrenched at the intersection of the modern administrative state and sur-

rounding institutions—for example, in social policy, in the media, and in the educational system, including universities. As they moved toward electoral power, conservatives remained weakest in institutions that are substantially self-reproducing and immune to easy change by elected officeholders. Teles analyzes and compares the strategies developed by conservatives situated in foundations and think tanks to counter and chip away at liberal norms and practices entrenched in the realms of Social Security and the law. In each arena, initial conservative strategies failed. But learning and innovation followed defeat, as conservatives fashioned new approaches that were less reactive and emphasized positive conservative alternatives, parallel institutions, greater populism, and attempts to appeal broadly to the public. While conservatives have made headway in each realm, these nonelectoral projects have also intersected in important ways with conservative activities in the Republican Party.

Policy and Politics in the New American Polity

Building on all that we have learned about major structural and ideological tendencies in the first two parts, part III traces policy lineages and legislative trends. The goal is not simply to tell policy stories for their own sake but to show how broader shifts in U.S. politics have reshaped what government does and the consequences of policies for citizen welfare and political participation. Suzanne Mettler and Nolan McCarty examine the political roots and consequences of trends of social policymaking over recent decades, while Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson examine another, equally critical aspect of public policy—the taxation decisions through which government decides how much revenue to raise, from whom, and with what likely consequences for future political battles.

In her chapter on the “Transformed Welfare State and the Redistribution of Political Voice,” Suzanne Mettler grapples with a paradox: American government spends more than ever on social programs, but citizens are less engaged in politics than in the past and many support an anti-government political agenda. She explores how the design of different policies and changes in their value and coverage over time may be themselves contributing to such outcomes. Changes in the American welfare state, Mettler suggests, have set in motion processes that are, slowly but surely, transforming the linkages between citizens and government.

During the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. federal government developed social programs and labor regulations that promoted economic security and educational opportunity across broad segments of the population. Some evidence suggests that such programs also helped to generate the active civic engagement of the post-war era. By helping to expand the scope of the active citizenry, broad and generous policies facilitated a

more democratic polity, in which political leaders had incentives to be responsive to average Americans. Since the 1970s, however, social programs have faced grave challenges, and some have fared better than others—with distinct social policy fates bearing consequences for the civic engagement of their beneficiaries. Elderly citizens have benefited from a virtuous circle of policies that generate political involvement, responsiveness from policymakers, and mobilization efforts by party officials to further encourage their electoral participation. By contrast, lower- and middle-class nonelderly and nondisabled citizens, even in the midst of rising employment insecurity and financial stress, rely on programs that have been shrinking in value and coverage. In response, they appear to be withdrawing from the electorate to varying degrees in accordance with the severity of retrenchment in the part of the social safety net on which they most rely.

At the same time, tax expenditures offer increasingly generous benefits to the affluent, with the effect of exacerbating their already strong advantage in the exercise of political voice; the associated realm of privately provided social provision compounds this pattern. This growing sector of social policies, in obscuring government's role, threatens to undermine citizens' support for more redistributive forms of social provision. In sum, these gradual shifts in the welfare state make the political voices of ordinary Americans less audible, while amplifying those of the well-to-do. Such dynamics help illuminate why, in turn, government has become increasingly responsive to the concerns of the wealthy and less attuned to the needs of average citizens.

Working with a theory of what it takes to overcome “veto points” and institutional gridlock in the divided-powers system of the U.S. federal government, Nolan McCarty explores “The Policy Effects of Political Polarization.” The divide between Democratic and Republican members of Congress has widened greatly over the past twenty-five years, reaching levels of partisan conflict not witnessed since the 1920s. After briefly summarizing arguments about the causes of this polarization, McCarty explores the consequences for public policymaking and politics. Polarization has made it harder to build legislative coalitions, leading to policy “gridlock,” he argues. Congress finds it harder to legislate, and the effectiveness of laws it does pass may be undermined by awkward concessions that have to be made to assemble majorities. Polarization has also fundamentally altered the balance of power among national institutions at the expense of Congress, encouraging executives and judges to act unilaterally without legislative consent.

McCarty considers the contents of legislation in an era of polarization, not just the sheer amount of legislative activity. He looks closely at the course of minimum-wage and social welfare legislation over recent

decades. Using these cases, he shows that partisan polarization may not be ideologically neutral in its legislative effects. Polarization has hampered the capacity of conservatives to pass laws, hamstringing their efforts to reconfigure policy. When polarization leads to gridlock, it can sometimes have de facto conservative consequences—especially when it stalls repeated action on social policies that require constant updating to hold their value or maintain their effectiveness in a changing society and economy.

Another kind of conservative tendency in policy development is highlighted in the chapter by Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson on “Tax Politics and the Struggle over Activist Government.” The story here is not one of legislative gridlock but of a remarkable growth in radical-conservative capacity to legislate significant cuts in taxes entailing major redistributions in the federal tax burden. Taxation represents the lifeblood of the modern activist state, and conservatives have found it a much more attractive political target than the major social programs that represent the core achievements of modern liberalism. Looking closely at contrasts between the Reagan era of the 1980s and the more recent George W. Bush era of conservative tax policymaking, Hacker and Pierson examine the evolution of taxes as a political issue—in the electorate, among key interest groups, and within the Republican Party establishment. This provides central insights about the developing character of the contemporary conservative movement—especially its shift toward more elite-centered strategies of political mobilization. The analysis also focuses on the development of policy itself, concentrating less on the particularities of each episode of policy change and more on what the broad trends in outcomes suggest about the transformed character of the American polity. Progress has been limited and halting, but over the long haul conservatives have had some success in shifting tax structures in ways that undercut the capacities of the activist state.

In the conclusion to this volume, we consider further what the long-term analyses presented here tell us about the current state and future prospects of American politics. Continued battles about the scope and financing of activist domestic government in the United States are a sure thing—but the contours of many of these conflicts are established by the long-term development of both the combatants and the terrain on which they struggle. The policy feedbacks and reorganizations of electoral, civic, and governmental institutions highlighted in this volume will continue to shape the inclinations and capacities of the conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats. What political actors want to do—and, above all, what they can do—depends very much on prior public policies, the institutional shape of the terrain on which they operate, and on how

those features have shaped each party to the conflict over the long run. Policies, movements, and institutions have been fundamentally transformed over the past half century, in ways this book has helped to make more visible. Not just short-term shifts in public opinion or electoral margins but the legacies of these major transformations will affect the course of American politics going forward.