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Book Review American Environmental Policy, 1990–2006: Beyond Gridlock

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No Abstract

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Book Review

American Environmental Policy, 1990–2006: Beyond Gridlock

Kristan Cockerill

American Environmental Policy, 1990–2006: Beyond Gridlock. C.M. Klyza and D. Sousa. 2008. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 385 pp. \$28 paperback.

In this useful volume, Klyza and Sousa begin with the premise that “legislative gridlock is a feature of modern environmental policymaking” and then provide substantial evidence to support their conclusion that legislative impasses have not resulted in policy stagnation. Instead, they argue that “congressional gridlock has channeled tremendous political energies down other policymaking pathways, creating considerable instability in policy as policymakers and interest groups have pursued their agendas—sometimes momentous policy shifts—in other venues.”

The authors briefly review causes of legislative gridlock, including partisan polarization, weakening liberalism, public opinion, interest group mobilization, pervasive media coverage, and the changing nature of environmental problems. They then present five key pathways that have largely replaced legislative action on environmental policy in the 1990–2006 timeframe. These are:

- The appropriations process;
- Executive branch policy making;
- The judicial process;
- Collaboration based politics; and
- State focused policy making.

Each of these pathways is the focal point for the book's core chapters. The authors offer detailed case studies highlighting how each pathway has been used to address environmental policy and assessing the pros and cons for each pathway, especially in comparison with legislative action. The case studies cover a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from roadless

designation on federal lands, to mercury emissions, to pesticides on food. The authors also discuss private efforts (e.g., land easements, consumer purchasing power) that are intertwined with environmental policy.

This text is powerful largely because Klyza and Sousa embed their ideas in the broad and deep historical context of American environmental policy. The authors argue that all attempts at policy reform are influenced by the “green state” that is the legacy of early nineteenth-century economic liberalism, the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century conservation movement, and the “golden era” of environmental legislation in the 1960s and 1970s. It is partially because of this legacy that the authors conclude that the “next generation” school and “its dreams of more pragmatic, incentive-based, collaborative approaches” to policy is not likely to be entirely successful.

Although I recommend it highly, there are a few issues with the book. The text frequently has a “cut and paste” feel rather than flowing with one voice and it is repetitive in places (e.g., in a two-page span, the authors state three times that President Bush and Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell invested substantial political capital to pass the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments). The authors also hit a pet peeve of mine by using “since” instead of “because” for non-time-relevant clauses.

Readers may not always agree with the authors' conclusions about policy events. For example, I take issue with their assessment that the 95-0 Senate vote regarding the Kyoto Protocol represents legislative gridlock rather than a pragmatic policy assessment of the agreement. For those of us who watched first-hand the environmental policy developments throughout this period, however, the book offers a wonderful review that has the benefit of hindsight to put the events into context. For those too young to have “lived” the period described, this book offers a well-founded introduction. It is also an excellent primer for the processes currently being used to promulgate policy (e.g., appropriations, riders).

Researchers are likely to find a trove of ideas for more specific assessments of current trends in environmental policy. One example might be more focused investigations into the role of science in the various pathways that Klyza and Sousa present. It is interesting that the authors note that the grassroots ecosystems management approach arose partially because of a perception that there is too much emphasis on science in decision making, whereas earlier in the text they indicated that habitat conservation plans are routinely criticized for lacking a sound scientific basis. This difference begs for a closer look.

I like this book for many reasons: it is easy to read, it is well-referenced, it includes an index and, perhaps most importantly, because on the whole, I agree with the authors' assessment of environmental policy development from 1990–2006 and with their predictions for what we can expect in this realm. Therefore, I will end with their words on the future of environmental policy: “As we head deeper into the twenty-first century, conservation and environmental policy in the United States will likely continue to be a mix of train wrecks and next generation success stories, of conflict and collaboration.”