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Giving Voters a Voice: The Origins of the Initiative and Referendum in America – Book Review

Todd Donovan

Western Washington University, todd.donovan@wwu.edu

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Review of Piott, Giving Voters a Voice

Review by: TODD DONOVAN

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Giving Voters a Voice: The Origins of the Initiative and Referendum in America. By Steven L. Piott. (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2003. x + 330 pp. \$39.95)

Steven Piott offers us an excellent account of the roots of direct democracy in America. Although there are many state-specific studies of the adoption of the initiative and referendum, *Giving Voters a Voice* is the most comprehensive account to date.

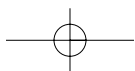
The direct citizen's initiative presents a departure from traditional methods of representative government that define nearly all established democracies. The diffusion of the initiative—or the lack of contagion beyond the American West—provides us with a difficult puzzle. Ever since mass democracy spread across the globe, it has been evolving: The right to vote expanded, voter control over representatives increased, and proportional representation displaced winner-take-all elections.

Yet despite the malleability of rules that structure democracy, representative government has been resilient. Few places allow citizens to draft and vote on their own laws. Why then, did direct democracy take hold in some American states but not others? The sixteen states in Piott's study help us understand forces that radically transformed many American states. By assessing the political and economic context of each state prior to the adoption of direct democracy, Piott identifies the common elements that changed these state constitutions.

The book is organized chronologically, starting with an overview of the origins of direct democracy in late nineteenth-century America. The early impetus came from New Jersey, where J. W. Sullivan's ideas inspired Populists to organize a People's Power League. Two attempts at establishing the initiative in New Jersey failed, but similar organizations inspired by Sullivan, William Jennings Bryan, and others succeeded in sixteen states between 1898 and 1918.

Piott's account draws from materials dating to a state's initiative-founding period: personal papers of key advocates, editorials, newspaper and magazine stories, convention proceedings, and legislative records. Sections of chapters describing a few states (e.g., Maine) rely heavily on secondary material, but most states are described using primary source material. Readers of David Schmidt's *Citizen Lawmakers* (Temple University Press, 1985) thus have much to gain from considering Piott's rich volume.

Piott identifies commonalities in states that adopted direct democracy. Reformers succeeded where parties (and legislatures)



were controlled by powerful economic interests, often railroads and resource extraction concerns. They succeeded where farmers were hit hard by recessions and where disparate groups (farmers, labor, prohibitionists, suffragists, miners, free silverites, single-taxers, or urban reformers) united for the cause. Given that constitutional reforms had to originate from legislatures hostile to the initiative, reformers faced substantial barriers.

Each state also has a unique story, and the reform coalitions varied. In some places, reformers took root within the Populist wing of the Democratic Party; in others, among Free Silver Republicans. In some places, their efforts were hamstrung by resilient party machines and partisan newspapers. This book gives us raw material to assess why wide-open direct democracy developed in Oregon and California, but it is less effective in explaining why reformers had less success in states like Nevada and New Jersey. It lacks a theory about which forces mattered most, and why they succeed some places but not others. Piott does a great job illustrating how the initiative originated during this period, but questions remain about “why the West?” and “why some parts of the West more than others?”

Western Washington University

TODD DONOVAN

Cultural Politics and the Mass Media: Alaska Native Voices. By Patrick J. Daley and Beverly A. James. (Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2004. x + 236 pp. \$35)

Alaska Native Voices describes the challenges facing Eskimo and Indian Alaskans who through the twentieth century used newspapers, community radio stations, and public television stations to defend their cultural ways and share of the region’s resources for self-sufficient purposes. After portaging through the theoretical introductions that open some of the book’s chapters, the reader will find a series of well-documented and well-told stories about Native media visionaries fighting everything from the violation of their fishing streams by commercial marauders to the proposed testing of atomic bombs on their lands.

The authors define the objective of their subjects (Aleut, Yup’ik, and Inupiat Eskimos; Athabaskan, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian Indians) as the defense of self-sufficient ways against numerous schemes to harness their lands for market, military, and hydrodynamic uses. Aboriginal activists employed media both as a form of protest and as a method of reifying indigenous cultures.

