THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Study of State and Local Politics and Policy

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The Oxford Handbook of State and Local Government is part of the eight-volume Oxford Handbook of American Politics. The chapters critically assess both the major contributions to the state and local politics literature and the ways in which the subfield has developed. Each of the chapters represents the author’s point of view and outlines an agenda for future research. This means that the authors have chosen to focus on some elements of the literature over others.

This volume can be viewed as a historic undertaking. It contains a wide range of essays that define the important questions in the field, critically evaluates where we are in answering them, and sets the direction and terms of discourse for future work. I believe that the volume will have a substantial influence in defining the field for years to come.

The chapters are organized thematically and cover the main areas of study in sub-national politics by exploring the central contributions to the comparative study of institutions, behavior, and policy in the American context. Each chapter also highlights the gaps in what we know and outlines an agenda for future research.

Despite the fact that the study of state and local politics had long been considered a backwater field of political science, scholars have rediscovered the rich dynamics and theoretical utility of focusing on state and local politics since the mid-1990s. Indeed many would suggest that the field has undergone an incredible rebirth in the past two decades. Of course many questions remain unanswered and in some areas we have barely scratched the surface. But in many areas we have learned a great deal and in the process contributed theoretically and empirically to the general study of politics. My goal in this volume, and the goal of the contributing authors, has been to highlight what we have learned and where we think the most fruitful research agendas still lie.

Those of us who study state and local politics come at the subject from a variety of perspectives. There are those of us who are intense followers of local political conditions, those who are focused on state and local politics as comparative units of analysis,
and those who only occasionally dip into the pool of state and local politics because they see the utility for testing broader theories of politics and/or policy. As you will read in these pages, we accept all comers and value the input and contributions. We also invite and encourage those who have yet to see the value of testing their theories of interest in the context of state and local politics to see the value of comparing across governments and policies that are similar but different enough to develop parsimonious models for testing frameworks and theories.

Indeed, what state and local scholars recognize is that this subfield is truly comparative in nature. State and local politics offer researchers the luxury of exploring theoretical questions in the context of political jurisdictions that are similar on manner dimensions but often different on a few, very important, dimensions. By comparison, a social welfare scholar studying policy across nations has incredible variation and finds it difficult to isolate the key variables that might explain why one jurisdiction has less generous social welfare benefits than does another. Or another example: those who try to explain the level of violent crime in different countries find it very difficult to isolate the potential impact of firearm regulations. But when examining these questions within a single country, where sub-national jurisdictions have authority to make policy decisions or policy implementation decisions, the researcher can more easily zero in on variation in a dimension of interest to lend support to a particular hypothesis or possibly dispel some conventional wisdom.

I would be remiss if I did not highlight the fact that scholars such as Bill Berry, Paul Brace, Tom Carsey, Melinda Gann-Hall, Liz Gerber, Virginia Gray, Malcolm Jewell, Ken Meier, Chris Mooney, Peverill Squire, Ron Weber, and Gerry Wright, among many others (see for example Brace and Jewett, 1995; Gray and Lowery, 1996, 2002; Carsey, 1999; Gerber, 1999; Mooney, 2001; Berry and Berry, 2007; Berry et al., 2010), had not preached this perspective for years. But what has really helped the field gain prominence since the 1990s has been Chris Mooney’s launch of *State Politics and Policy Quarterly (SPPQ)* as well as the inaugural State Politics and Policy Conference in 2000 at Texas A&M. Each year the journal has published some of the best sub-national research in social science, and the conference, sponsored each year in a different city (usually by one or more Universities) has featured the top researchers as well as the brightest graduate students in sub-national politics. Indeed, over the first 10 years of its existence *SPPQ* had several years where it had an impact factor in the top 35 of all political science journals. Both the journal and the annual conference continue to be a major life-blood of the subfield.

**Outline of the Volume**

As has been customary in *SPPQ* and at the annual conference, we have tried to explore sub-national politics more broadly in the volume by considering the international arena and other federalist systems in particular chapters. Some chapters are explicit in their titles about this approach, others, such as the regulatory policy chapter, have sections devoted to a comparative perspective.
But as most readers would expect the bulk of the volume focuses on the American federalist system with its particular nuances and frustrations. The volume is organized into several sections beginning with introductory chapters on relations between national, state, and local governments. As these chapters illustrate, the American federalist system of government continues to evolve with the policy jurisdictions and authority of the different levels of government continuing to ebb and flow. Although the 1970s and 1980s clearly introduced a new era of devolution of power and responsibility to state and local governments, and U.S. Supreme Court ruling have largely followed this pattern, the homeland security demands of the 2000s and fiscal crisis of the later portion of the first decade of this century once again made visible so much of the national government power and involvement in virtually every aspect of our lives. Of course the emergencies that made national government authority once again more visible spawned a whole variety of political activity, not the least of which was local and state government attempts to reassert their perceived powers and authority.

The second section of the volume emphasizes political behavior at the sub-national level with chapters devoted to political participation in local and state contests, the role of political parties and interest groups, and the nature of sub-national campaigns and elections. Here we get a clear glimpse of the variation across sub-national jurisdictions, whether it be wide variations in the level of political participation across states or different types of elections, or the variations in the rules that shape everything from participation in elections to reporting of lobbying activities.

Sections 3 and 4 dive into the meat of the utility of sub-national variation in a political system where the overall similarities are greater than the differences. In Section 3 the authors explore the institutional variation at the state level, which chapters on constitutions, legislatures, executives, courts, and bureaucracy, not forgetting the semi-unique aspect of the American system which allows for direct democracy institutions if sub-national jurisdictions choose to allow for. Each chapter highlights the importance of variation for testing social science theory, from the huge size of the New Hampshire lower legislative chamber, to the expansive powers of Wisconsin’s governor, to the highly contested state supreme court elections in Texas, to the relative ease at which citizens in California can place policy questions on the ballot.

Likewise in Section 4 the authors examine some of the relatively unique elements of local American political institutions as well as some of their roots in largely European traditions. For example, Mullin explores the explosion of special districts at the sub-national level and their importance for policy and governance, while LeRoux examines the variation in local bureaucratic governance and its importance for policy formation and implementation.

Sections 5 and 6 examine what we know and need to know, about public policy and the policy process at the sub-national level. In Section 5 the authors explain the boundaries of our understanding about the process of policymaking at the sub-national level. Most importantly from my perspective, the chapters in Section 5 delve into elements of the local and state policymaking process that involve economic policymaking the problematic elements of addressing inequality in representation in the process and in policy outcomes.
Section 6 continues this theme but these chapters examine specific issue areas. Admittedly not all possible issue areas are covered and this again reveals the biased guidelines I provided to the authors. My goal was to highlight some of the most relevant issue areas in sub-national politics for the twenty-first century, not every issue sub-national governments address. Here again the focus tends to be on the representation of some issue interests over others and the issues that are likely to be recurrent in sub-national policymaking over the next 50 or 50 years. As will be noted in the concluding chapter, one gap here is homeland security and emergency management for large scale disasters—the literature here is still in a fairly youthful state at the sub-national level.

The final section of the volume attempts to bring the comparative study of sub-national politics and policy back to its roots in theoretically motivated social science research questions. Although some scholars envy the perceived volumes of data available to sub-national scholars of industrialized countries, especially the U.S., these chapters address ongoing theoretical and methodical issues that confound us and limit our ability to spell out what it is we do understand as well as the so-called dimensions of the known unknowns, as well as potentially point us toward the “unknown unknowns.”

It is our hope that this volume will provide an accessible set of works to scholars and students of sub-national politics that provides a foundation for what is most important about what we do know, and, more importantly, what is most important about what we do not yet know. None of the authors here believe that they have had the final word and hope that that the focused presentation of the literature that hey provide will inspire the next generation of scholars to continue in our pursuit of knowledge.

References