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## Grossman, M. Artists of the possible. Governing networks and American policy change since 1945. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

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**Grossman, M. *Artists of the possible. Governing networks and American policy change since 1945.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.**

Political empires awaken both love and hate. Admired for their seemingly sophisticated lifestyles (which are simultaneously peddled to and imposed upon those on the periphery) while at the same time reviled for their unilateral decision-making in international spheres, empires typically seize opportunities to fill political vacuums and dictate international agendas (Revel, 2003; Korstanje, 2015). As a modern-day political empire, the United States is both admired and reviled; indeed, American democracy has been examined and praised for decades, yet few studies have explained with clarity how American political policies are drafted or how US policy decisions are made. *The Artists of the Possible*, a work by Matt Grossmann, professor at Michigan State University, does just this. In this polemic yet compelling project, he boldly explores the insularity of American policy makers, who are swayed neither by public opinion nor elections. In only six chapters, Grossmann carefully places the concept of democracy under the lens of scrutiny.

As envisaged by the founders of the United States, democracy entails both political decentralization and autonomous leadership. Within this system, political actors and their respective institutions are pressed to negotiate with others parts of the same system. As a result, a balance of power is maintained. However, as an unintended consequence of this system, the power of one branch of government may be stymied by the efforts of another branch, says Grossman, irrespective of the wishes of the populous. For instance, the US executive branch has faced serious problems implementing meaningful changes to the ways in which popular demands are addressed. The fact is that neither individuals nor lobby groups ultimately have much say in how US laws are passed or vetoed.

The preliminary chapters of the book discuss the conceptual background of the text and outline the methodological instruments used to obtain the information cited in the work. The author also discusses the limited scope of existing literature within political science that seeks to understand how US democratic policy-making works. At its heart, Grossman's book challenges Americans' view of their own democratic government. Says Grossman:

Despite Abraham Lincoln's vision that our government is of the people, by the people and for people, there is little evidence that the most important outcomes of the policy process follow uniformly from the opinion of American public of their expressions in elections. Instead, these inputs matter for policymaking only alongside factors like research and interest group lobbying, each under a limited set of circumstances. Policymakers can and do collectively ignore public opinion and the direction of elections result, sometimes by enacting contrary policy but most often by making no change at all. (p. 9)

Based on the need to protect the interests of the status-quo, the US's decentralized political system, which was consolidated only after 1945, says Grossman, leads elected officials to dialogue primarily with other agents, institutions, and actors—relying more upon the input of other political and financial stakeholders than that of the public they purportedly represent. Defying four of the most-used theories in political science, observes Grossman, American policy-making follows its own, unique dynamic. For example, in the US, there is limited use of *agenda setting*, a model meant to utilize the media<sup>1</sup> as a means by which to prioritize certain issues over others in the minds of the populous; indeed, achieving the support of the American public on any given issue seems not to be a critical step in the US policy-making process. The US similarly flouts the use of the *macro politics* typical of other democracies, encompassing the family of theories that emphasize the ideological control of the government in order to frame not only government interests but policies. According to conventional macro political theory, the input of factors such as election results, ideologies, and public opinion plays

a vital role in determining which policies to enact (and which to ignore). In the US, however, such input does not necessarily directly correspond to policy outcome. The third tenet of democracy that is often skirted in US policy-making involves the family of *issue typologies*, which posits that social change is possible whenever agreement is reached in some area of common interest and that where agreement is not reached, policy should be re-considered. Negotiations and majorities normally play a crucial role at this stage; in US policy-making, however, the desires or demands of the majority do not necessarily inform political decision-making. Finally, in democracy, *actor success* is normally viewed as a conceptual corpus that considers the influence of actors over time, evaluating not only what policies have been successfully enacted but also the means by which those policies were implemented in order to understand which mechanisms led to efficient policy change. In the US, however, such reflection is rare. One by one, Grossmann enumerates the limited use or reliance upon these theories in American politics.

Centering his content on the analysis of the almost 790 US policies enacted since 1945, Grossmann combines his examination and diagnosis of US policy-making with an analysis of US social networks, laws, and other secondary sources and documents. The main thesis of this work is that both entrepreneurs<sup>2</sup> and other individual proponents of change in the US face serious barriers in their efforts to respond to local demands. He asserts not only that US political institutions and actors actively prevent the enactment of policies that would directly respond to public demand but also that US political stakeholders, in fact, favor limiting policy change. Grossman concludes that in a decentralized system, in which checks and balances are responsible not only for maintaining an appropriate balance of power but also for causing political gridlock,<sup>3</sup> governments must take initiative to overcome the many obstacles to responding to popular demand.

As a Latin American social scientist, this reviewer found Grossmann's argument particularly helpful in two main senses. Democracy has been developed in Spanish speaking countries following a direct form of representation (*i.e.*, presidents are elected by the vote of the majority), and, historically, the governments of these countries have conducted both their campaigns and their administrations echoing popular claims; however, these governments are also prone to manipulating their policy-making agendas as a means of increasing their legitimacy or to introducing presidential decrees in order to prevent social discontent. As such, while the populist-based strategies typical of South American democracies may result in a more fluid and direct dialogue between governments and their citizens, there is no less political instability in these nations. Second, the vertical power structures developed by political officials in South American governments have generated a certain level of increased autonomy for the executive branches of such governments (over their respective senates and judiciary branches), often facilitating serious internal disputes among political leadership. These conflicts have surely paved the way for the advent of military forces intervening in public politics in many Latin American nations. Coups in these nations have represented not only attempts by financial oligarchies to retain legitimacy and exert authority over populist leaders but also an efficient mechanism of exerting social control.

Despite these differences, one must not conclude that American democracy is "more democratic" (or "less democratic," for that matter) than Argentinian democracy, for example. Instead, one may conclude, as Grossman does, that American democracy has developed a complex political networking system in which different political agents and blocs negotiate with other forces to promote or prevent social change and that such complex political networking has evolved at the expense of the authentic representation of the American people within their own government.<sup>4</sup> This begs some questions regarding the extent to which America is in fact the birthplace of democracy. This would be a fascinating discussion in Grossman's next undertaking. In short, Grossman's *Artists of the Possible* is a fascinating work that provides a sharp, insightful analysis of the history and development of American policy-making and sheds new light on the understanding of how US political actors have adapted one of

the most fundamental tenets of US democracy—*i.e.*, the importance of a decentralized system—to serve their own purposes in the name of political stability.

### References

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<sup>1</sup> Although the media is widely used in US politics, current American policy-making shows some limitations in determining the actual impact of media use in real politics. According to Grossman, this limitation is due to the fact that media use itself reflects the status quo bias.

<sup>2</sup> Though at the micro-level, American democracy encourages individual entrepreneurship, at the macro-level, it blocks or shackles the efforts of entrepreneurial thinkers with policy roadblocks and obstacles.

<sup>3</sup> Though the US' Madisonian model of democracy is successful in limiting social change resulting from governmental policy making, which serves to maintain a balance of power among government branches (and was originally intended to protect the public from the various personal interests of those in any particular branch of government), the constraints placed on the government with respect to enacting social change also limit the government's ability (and, indeed, inclination) to respond to popular expression.

<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason in part that the term *Anglo-democracy* has been coined in some circles to denote political systems (including that of the US) in which leaders are not elected by direct majority and in which public opinion is not necessarily integral to public policy-making.