

critically important findings about the way symbols prime different reactions by respondent race. For example, Elizabeth Maltby (“The Political Origins of Racial Inequality,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 70[3], 2017) shows how racially skewed enforcement in a community affects members of that community differently based on race. Its effect seems to be particularly acute when the biased enforcement involves harassing behavior on the part of the police (see Amy E. Lerman and Velsa Weaver, “Staying out of Sight?” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 651[1], 2014). Insights from these studies of community-level policy impacts may help untangle the conditional effects involving direct and vicarious negative experience with police.

In what is perhaps an attempt not to extrapolate beyond their analyses, the authors provide only a limited discussion of the implications of their findings for the Supreme Court’s future. I was left wanting more here, particularly as it relates to their stated interest in pursuing “strategies for reducing the gap” (p. 175) in assessments of the legal system. However, this book invites the rest of the field to continue this conversation. We should heed this call to interrogate our research for the prioritization of privileged perspectives, following the lead that Gibson and Nelson provide in this important and timely book.

Bending the Rules: Procedural Politicking in the Bureaucracy. By Rachel Augustine Potter. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 256p. \$90.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

Rule Breaking and Political Imagination. By Kenneth A. Shepsle. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 176p. \$67.50 cloth, \$22.50 paper.
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These books provide important insights into the role that institutions play in shaping policymaking and political life and, particularly, how savvy political actors bend and break the rules of the game in pursuit of their ends. Rather than taking institutions as ironclad restraints on behavior, these books urge us to think about how well-positioned actors can push the boundaries of institutions that seemingly constrain them to achieve their goals, and in doing so, potentially transform the meaning and operations of the institutions themselves.

In *Bending the Rules: Procedural Politicking in the Bureaucracy*, Rachel Potter shines new light on the rule-making process in the United States. The book demonstrates how bureaucrats navigate the technical and procedure-laden territory of promulgating regulations to advance their interests, and potentially subvert the interests of their political principals. Rather than adopting the view that procedural requirements serve as a means of political control that hem in the policy ambitions of

bureaucrats and ensure their responsiveness to elected officials, Potter argues that bureaucrats can use and shape these procedures to their own ends. By recognizing that the implementation of procedures is fundamentally at the discretion of the agents they are meant to control, Potter turns the standard logic of procedures and political control on its head. Rather than serving to enhance the accountability of the administrative state to elected officials, the fact that bureaucrats themselves implement procedures may undermine that goal, at least in some cases, by increasing the costs of political intervention.

Potter’s argument suggests a number of interesting hypotheses about how bureaucrats should structure the rulemaking process under conditions when they are concerned about political oversight. As is often the case when we think about the bureaucracy, the politics is in the details. Potter draws on an extensive and nuanced understanding of the rulemaking process to identify clear junctures at which agency officials can turn their discretion over procedures to their advantage. The theoretical framework suggests that bureaucrats will seek to manipulate the clarity and complexity of the language included in rules, the timing of comment periods, and the time at which rules are finalized to elude the influence of unfavorable political environments.

To assess these arguments, Potter turns to an impressive dataset of nearly 11,000 significant regulatory actions agencies worked on between 1995 and 2014. Over the course of four empirical chapters, Potter illuminates several aspects of the rulemaking process. Several notable findings emerge, which together paint a picture of the degree to which bureaucrats strategically deploy procedures. Together, the findings suggest that, at least at the margins, bureaucrats press their procedural advantages to avoid adverse oversight environments.

First, Potter demonstrates that agencies write significantly longer preambles to rules (i.e., the portions of the rules that lay out the agency’s reasoning and purpose in the regulation) in the face of opposition from Congress, the president, and the courts, when each of these is combined with the opposition of mobilized interest groups. The length of these preambles serves as a signal to potential regulatory opponents that the agency has addressed and considered possible objections. Notably, the same dynamics do not appear to drive the readability of the text, suggesting that bureaucrats are not also writing increasingly inscrutable preambles to confound political oversight. One wonders, however, if there may be ceiling effects in this case. The standard text readability scores adapted by Potter to this context may simply be unsuited to picking up the nuances in readability that present in the specialized texts agencies write.

Potter also demonstrates that agencies respond to unaligned presidents and congressional majorities by manipulating comment periods, albeit in different ways.

When presidents are ideologically opposed to agencies but interest groups are not, Potter finds that agencies offer extended comment periods, ostensibly to gin up support for their policy initiatives. With respect to Congress, the findings suggest that opposition to the agency in Congress and among interest groups leads to more comment periods being scheduled during congressional recesses, when it is more difficult for interest groups to mobilize principals against the agency.

The next chapter examines the amount of time that it takes agencies to finalize their rulemakings. Here again, Potter demonstrates that the choices bureaucrats make depend on their political environments, showing convincing evidence of “slow-rolling” and “fast-tracking” in the regulatory process. On the one hand, when principals are likely to be skeptical of agency policies, bureaucrats have incentives to delay their promulgation. On the other hand, when facing supportive principals, agencies will act to finalize their policies more quickly given the favorable political environment. Thus, through yet another means, agencies appear to turn procedural discretion toward achieving their own ends.

The final empirical chapter of the book focuses on the case of the Food and Drug Administration’s menu labeling regulations mandated by the Affordable Care Act. Drawing on interviews with administrative officials as well as contemporaneous reporting, Potter’s adept narrative helps to ground the large-N statistical analyses in previous chapters.

Overall, Potter’s work breaks exciting theoretical and empirical ground and forces readers to reconsider their prior beliefs about how and when procedures can and cannot result in responsiveness to political principals. Political scientists will grapple with and expand on Potter’s arguments in the years to come. First, a renewed focus on the incentives of bureaucrats and their agency (if not autonomy) in the timing of the regulatory process poses interesting challenges to the ways political scientists typically approach questions of political control. For instance, if an agency slow-rolls a regulation waiting for a more favorable principal, its promulgation may appear to be responsive to the new principal’s preferences, but we would typically overlook the non-responsiveness occurring in the years before. Second, this speaks to a broader need for a renewed focus on the motivations and actions of bureaucrats themselves in the regulatory process, in contrast to the top-down approach many studies of political control take. If bureaucrats indeed have the power to shape rulemaking in the way Potter suggests, then the normative implications of the results depend on this. Finally, most of the findings Potter presents suggest the importance of interactions between principals and the broader interest group environment. Future scholars will undoubtedly probe how interest groups (particularly when they are mobilized on both sides of an issue) facilitate and inhibit the procedural politicking Potter illuminates.

While Potter presents a convincing picture of strategic bureaucrats using existing institutions to advance their own interests, in *Rule Breaking and Political Imagination*, Kenneth Shepsle urges us to think broadly about the institutions that structure political action: where they come from, how they are sustained, and most importantly, how they change. Shepsle guides readers on a tour spanning millennia, providing engaging accounts of episodes of institutional transgressions and the individuals behind them. The narrative relatively seamlessly jumps from King David to Sulla and Caesar to Thomas Brackett Reed to Lyndon Johnson.

Behind these interesting stories lie important lessons for political scientists, particularly those that study political institutions and their impacts on behavior. For example, we should be at least somewhat wary of accounts that portray institutions as fixed and self-enforcing. Instead, the narratives Shepsle weaves focus on the fragility of institutions in some contexts. Through means ranging from blatant transgression to cunning reinterpretations of rules, the political actors portrayed in the book find more and less blunt or artful ways around institutional roadblocks to their political goals.

Shepsle stops short of offering a full-blown theory of rule breaking, but instead offers tantalizing hints at the types of calculations actors might make when deciding whether or not to chart a new course outside the strictures of formal and informal institutions. Perhaps even more exciting for scholars of institutions are the gestures made throughout the book at the links that may exist between instances of rule-breaking and institutional change. At several points in the narrative, one is tempted to see instances of rule-breaking as the harbingers of institutional erosion and recasting.

While students of political institutions in the rational choice framework have at times been accused of oversimplifying political actors, Shepsle’s narrative focuses to a large degree on the entrepreneurs of rule breaking and bending: their complex motivations, their attempts at unwieldy utility calculations in the face of substantial uncertainty, and, perhaps most importantly, their unique insights about how to break free of existing institutional arrangements.

Political scientists reading Shepsle’s book will undoubtedly be prompted to think about institutional change and evolution in new ways. The book raises important questions about the consequences of institutional transgression and reimagining. In particular, when are these episodes simply blips in the history of institutions and when do they facilitate wholesale institutional change? Even more importantly, how can we determine when rule breaking is a cause of institutional decline or when it reflects a process of erosion and rebuilding already in motion?

In sum, both of these books offer exciting new insights into the ways that political actors bend and break long-

standing institutions and use them to their advantage. Both contributions will surely inspire new work on these topics. These books have obviously important lessons for political scientists, but I expect that they will find a place on reading lists and syllabi in other disciplines as well, including law, public policy, and public administration.

Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive. By Roderick P. Hart. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 370p. \$99.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592719004869

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During this age of purported voter apathy and citizen disengagement, Roderick P. Hart offers *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive*. In this book, Hart uses abundant evidence in the form of newspaper letters to the editor to demonstrate how a robust “culture of argument” (p. 10) sustains and nurtures democracy in the United States. Letters, Hart writes, evidence an ongoing willingness of people to call out imperfections in the nation’s leaders and the nation’s policies, while also debating ideas, in writing, with their neighbors. Hart draws his conclusions from a dataset that spans seven decades (1948–2018) and so runs the gamut from when newspapers were part of the daily artifice of many American doorsteps to the recent era of print decline and the rise of internet culture.

Hart crafts his thesis around what he terms “civic hope,” or the preternatural American ability to maintain faith in democratic ideals despite bleak odds. Such hope is more than optimism. It is a willingness of people to struggle with themselves and each other about the meaning of the nation in which they live and to push forward in the face of problems. By conducting a content analysis of 10,000 letters from newspapers in 12 midsize cities—in addition to 10 surveys that happened over 20 years, as well as in-depth interviews with some letter writers and editors—Hart provides insight into how people negotiate and clarify political values; expect their leaders and fellow citizens in the nation to act; and lament failures of behavior and action, publicly and permanently, in writing. By studying letters to the editor, Hart explains, scholars can apprehend the “texture of people’s beliefs—the reasons underlying their opinions and the varied ways in which a given belief can be expressed” (p. 8; emphasis in original).

Much of Hart’s enthusiasm for studying letters derives from their source as grassroots evidence. The 12 cities from which he draws data are “nothing special,” he writes: they are not New York, San Francisco, or New Orleans (p. 22). Rather, they are places whose letters and writers are worthy of study precisely because they could be anywhere. Although those who write are almost never famous, they are important because they have composed at least one

letter to the editor. This singular act elevates them beyond political cynicism. There is a kind of Tocquevillian nostalgia inherent in Hart’s argument—he admits as much himself (on p. 25)—because he insists that citizenship is realized not only through voting but also through writing and speaking. This nostalgia extends to Hart’s idealization of the printed word as the quintessential form of democratic debate. The book underexplores whether this idealization still holds in a twenty-first century, post-Trump world.

Hart also argues convincingly that letter writers act as citizen vanguards against disengagement and even disinformation. They keep the conversation going. However, recent studies make plain that the public is more likely than ever to believe in and act on falsehoods and lies. In later chapters, especially chapter 7, Hart suggests that even when letter writers get things wrong their contribution is still additive because they keep people thinking and conversing. However, as Yochai Benkler and Robert Faris recently wrote in *Network Propaganda* (2018), “as a public we have lost our capacity to agree on shared modes of validation as to what is going on and what is just plain whacky” (p. 6). Hart suggests that we can survive such wackiness so long as people keep writing. However, he never fully explains why this should be the case, except to celebrate how letters are the purview of ordinary people and reveal ordinary Americans’ political ideas and anxieties.

An indisputable strength of the book is Hart’s use of breakout quotes from writers. The words give life to the manuscript, just as Hart argues that the letters he studies give vibrancy to US democracy. Readers move through time from commentary about Truman and Eisenhower to dyspeptic remarks about the character of Donald Trump. Such examples are grounded in extensive data analysis that includes digestible charts and bulleted lists that undergraduate readers may find helpful as they make their way through nearly 300 pages of text, not including appendices. Getting through so many pages is helped mightily by Hart’s writing. His prose is engaging, authoritative, and scholarly all at the same time.

Each chapter is well grounded in literature in political science and political communication. Hart nicely surveys what others have discovered about his questions and then uses his own letter data to color or trouble those conclusions. This tack works especially well in chapters 4–9, in which he wonders who writes letters, who reads them, what makes them compelling, and what makes them interesting, and more. Turning the stereotype of the crackpot curmudgeon on its head, Hart continually emphasizes the ordinary nature of those who compose letters, insisting that although they tend toward the earnest in personality, they make up for this with healthy doses of skepticism. Readers read letters for many reasons, including to learn and feel connected to the community.