

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Political Science Faculty Research and
Publications

Political Science, Department of

6-2020

**Review of *Red State Blues: How the Conservative Revolution
Stalled in the States***

Philip B. Rocco

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/polisci_fac



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Political Science Faculty Research and Publications/College of Arts and Sciences

This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION.

Access the published version via the link in the citation below.

Perspectives on Politics, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 2020): 627-629. [DOI](#). This article is © American Political Science Association and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). American Political Science Association does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without express permission from American Political Science Association.

Review of *Red State Blues: How the Conservative Revolution Stalled in the States.*
By Matt Grossmann. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 200p. \$79.99 cloth, \$24.99 paper.

Philip Rocco

Political Science, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

There's an old saying that goes, "If you've seen one state's Medicaid program, you've seen one state's Medicaid program." The same applies to US state politics writ large. However "nationalized" the compound republic becomes, and whatever structural similarities state governments possess, studying subnational politics requires attention to an unwieldy number of variations in the quality of

representative government. It also necessitates analytical trade-offs. One approach, best exemplified in Matt Grossmann's *Red State Blues*, widens the analytical lens to focus on macropolitical dynamics in the states. By forsaking some of the analytical depth of, say, single-policy case studies, Grossmann offers a more encompassing set of insights about who governs the 50 states and to what ends.

The empirical setting for *Red State Blues* is a revolution in the control of state governments. Between 1990 and 2017, a combination of cyclical partisan swings and secular changes in the electorate produced a massive series of political gains for the Republican Party. Despite their increasing ideological extremity, however, Republicans have largely avoided electoral backlash in the states. Outside a small number of solidly "blue" states, Democrats have had difficulty reconsolidating political control in the face of Republican gains, reinforced by geographic polarization, not to mention extreme partisan gerrymanders crafted after the 2010 Republican sweep of state elections.

Yet Grossmann is less concerned with the roots of Republicans' electoral resurgence in the states than with what Republican governance has wrought. Cross-nationally, conservative parties have traditionally found it difficult to dramatically retrench the size and scope of government activities, especially when those activities generate mobilized political constituencies and institutional support structures. Have state-level Republicans, by and large, been able to make good on their party's increasingly conservative ideological commitments?

The answer, Grossmann finds, is a qualified "no." Since the 1960s, state governments have grown in size, and the policies they adopt have become, by several measures, more liberal. In spite of Republican gains, the size and scope of government in the states have continued to grow. On net, liberal policy initiatives continue to experience a greater level of legislative success than do conservative ones. Nevertheless, Republicans are able to affect policy when they consolidate power *across* branches at the state level. The movement toward conservative policy victories, however, accrues slowly and incrementally over time. Translation: those assuming Wisconsin would become Alabama soon after Scott Walker assumed the governorship may have experienced some measure of disappointment. And when conservatives successfully enacted more extreme policy experiments—as in Governor Sam Brownback's significant tax cuts in Kansas—political backlash (eventually) followed.

Chapter 4 takes up the question of why conservatives have had difficulties converting their electoral victories into policy gains. Adopting a method employed in his earlier work, Grossmann draws on a content analysis of 18 book-length histories of policy making across 15 states. From these histories, he extracts data on 92 major legislative proposals in the states. To complement these histories, Grossmann incorporates interviews with statehouse reporters and detailed case studies of several major policy areas. Several themes emerge from this qualitative analysis. First, conservatives can be constrained by judicial decisions, direct-democracy initiatives, and in some cases, social protest. Second, once elected, Republicans often fail to carry forward their most expansive pledges to reduce the size of government. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the structure of state governments imposes its own kind of institutional conservatism on policy making, because states must balance their budgets and have few tools available to truly transform fiscal policy. The frustration of the conservative legislative agenda perhaps helps explain why the Republican Party and its allies in the conservative legal movement have pursued both legislation and litigation aimed at cabining the powers of Democratic governors, purging voter rolls, and increasing barriers to ballot-box access. It may also

explain why legislatures in some ballot-initiative states have rejected popularly ratified Medicaid expansions and have introduced new legislation to further restrict direct democracy.

Still, do conservative policies—once enacted—have measurable socioeconomic effects? On the whole, Grossmann finds mixed evidence. On the one hand, state welfare reforms decreased the number of people on cash assistance and left the unemployed poorer. On the other hand, published studies revealed conflicting results on these reforms' effects on income. Abortion restriction legislation led to clinic closures and increased incidence of abortion-related travel.

In short, it is reasonable to argue that Republican governance has produced neither a clear bundle of policies nor the coherent set of policy impacts suggested in election-year rhetoric. Still, the effects of political changes on socioeconomic outcomes take a long time to reveal themselves. As Grossmann notes, citing work by Gerald Gamm and Thad Kousser, states with high levels of interparty competition have historically spent more on education and health, which is associated with higher rates of life expectancy and household incomes.

Red State Blues is a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary state politics. In essence, it illustrates the considerable challenges conservative parties face in “moving the needle” on the architecture of social and regulatory policy in the states. To make this case, Grossmann weaves together multiple methodological approaches. This strategy of triangulation should serve as a model for how scholars can approach the unwieldy task of examining politics across the 50 states. It is also worth noting that the evidence marshaled to test his core argument is bolstered by the author's own significant work in establishing the Correlates of State Policy Project, which collates data on more than 900 political, social, and economic variables, with observations spanning longer than a century.

Perhaps because Grossmann frames and executes the study so carefully, *Red State Blues* also raises a series of important questions about how to make analytical trade-offs when studying state politics. The book's centerpiece is its rigorous analysis of how Republican control of government affects policy change. Yet even if the “topline” analysis is that the conservative policy revolution stalled, not all red states are singing the blues. Indeed, the evidence also suggests that the revolution “stalled” to varying degrees across policy areas and across the states. The analysis of why this occurred—contained in chapter 4—is largely presented in the aggregate, however. I was left with an appetite for more detail on how often major policy initiatives were thwarted by direct democracy, the courts, or public backlash. And especially given the limited institutional capacity of many state legislatures, I was surprised to see little evidence focused specifically on policy developments that play out in the executive branch or, for that matter, through state courts. If, as Gøsta Carlsson puts it, “research is a game against nature in which nature counters with a strategy of concealment,” one of the lingering challenges of studying state politics is that the legislative chambers—where consistent data are more easily recovered—are rarely the only sites of action (“Lagged Structures and Cross-Sectional Methods,” *Acta Sociologica* 15, 1972, p. 323). This is especially true when considering the highly intergovernmental nature of many significant state policies.

These limitations are perhaps natural for a study that aims to capture broad trends rather than contextual details. Yet they also highlight a need for greater institutionalized collaboration between scholars in the fields of federalism and state politics. For example, studying subtler changes in policy

implementation over time would likely benefit from the establishment of a scholarly network of the sort pioneered by Richard Nathan and his colleagues at the Rockefeller Institute of Government.

Thus in addition to its own accomplishments, *Red State Blues* hints at the important discoveries that could be made were political scientists to establish a more permanent “observatory” for the study of state-level democracy. Given some states’ recent implementation of voter-roll purges, the emergence of anti-protest legislation, and other episodes of “constitutional hardball,” creating such an observatory seems more important than ever.