

Book Review

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Jody C. Baumgartner and Peter L. Francia (2020). **Conventional Wisdom and American Elections: Exploding Myths, Exploring Misconceptions** (Fourth Edition). New York, Rowman & Littlefield. Pages i-xvi and 1-216. ISBN: 978-1-5381-2916-6 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5381-2917-3 (electronic).

Abstract

Eleven common topics are discussed in this book by the authors. Very detailed research is reviewed. This helps the reader understand that some topics have some degree of consensus among professors of American political science. Furthermore, those topics that do not have a firm consensus of opinion are described, so that the reader can see where more research is needed and is indeed happening. This book is good for general readership as well as for undergraduate and graduate courses.

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JEL Classification: Z0.

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Introduction

Jody Baumgartner and Peter Francia are professors at East Carolina University and co-authors of this book. The phrase that comes immediately to my mind about this book is that it is both informative and entertaining. Topics are adequately discussed, and the book is crisp and succinct in its presentation of topics. In eleven chapters the authors look at what may be some commonly held beliefs concerning American elections and ascertain the validity of those beliefs.

Discussion

Of course, political science is a social science and so dealing with people, beliefs should not be axiomatic. Consequently, the authors bring up some instances of key evidence against any popular thinking, that has been inadequately analyzed. For example, the preface and Chapter 6 notes that presidential campaigns seem to have to include newer heights of acrimony. For example, the 2016 presidential campaign was by some accounts, “The ‘nastiest’ ever” (p. xiii). However, Baumgartner and Francia maintain that a high level of ruthlessness has gone on in American politics for more than two centuries (p. xiii and 75-90). This 4th edition of this book was published in 2020. I would be interested in how these two adroit scholars treat the January 6, 2021, capitol invasion by some angry Trump supporters. I have worked in government and studied government at the graduate level, and my two primary areas of work has been in public finance and macroeconomics. I sincerely believe more communications between social scientists of different disciplines has enhance my understanding of different subjects. Possibly more interaction can be fruitful for all.

Baumgartner and Francia show that voter turnout is steadier than what the media will sometimes have people believe. Not surprisingly, there is research that suggest voting is a habit. That is, the more a person votes in past

elections, the more likely he or she is likely to vote in future elections (pp. 13-28). In addition, party identification still guides most voters in most elections. Indeed, there is some evidence that when some people say undecided in surveys, they say that since they do not believe they are obligated to tell surveyors who, the undecided are already leaning towards a candidate or candidates (pp. 1-12). Despite different groups and individuals clamoring for a third political party, the two main political parties, the Interestingly, Democrat and Republican party will likely continue for the foreseeable future. American students hear in primary and secondary school that George Washington cautioned the nation from being too dependent on political parties. students (29-44). Money is certainly necessary for a winning campaign but having a good candidate helps and that also helps bring in more campaign donations. Campaign finance is important in both primary elections and general elections. (pp. 45-58).

In presidential elections, both the presidential and vice-presidential nominees are important; however, voters are mostly swayed by who the presidential nominee is. The importance of the Vice-Presidency is becoming greater, as specific duties tend to be assigned to Vice-Presidents, in the last few decades, (pp. 59-74). With more TV stations and networks there is more competition for viewership. Nowadays, with so many different news programs available via cable, most news is slanted to the left or right in varying degrees. So, in the present-day environment, a viewer is going to be able to find a TV program that spins the news to the left or right. In fact, it is difficult to find an objective news source (pp. 91-104). Also, with the intense competition between media outlets, there is even more incentive for individual media to get attention in different ways. In fact, it often amounts to sensationalism. For example, many media outlets will announce that an upcoming election or group of elections will be more profoundly than many of the others and that the different media outlets has the scoop that you must listen to, in order to be informed.

Presidential candidate debates are in most instances, not game changers. However, they do have value in reviewing some of his key positions of the candidates (pp. 105-118). Polling is not an exact science but is helpful. Also, if there is going to be any validity to a poll it should examine the views of likely voters, not just the public at a large (pp. 119-134). The advantage of incumbency, help current Congressional office holders get re-elected. So, in some sense, Congressional elections lack any high degree of competitiveness and many studies have shown that. Often the public does not realize the degree of a lack of competitiveness in Congressional elections. (pp. 135-150). The idea of a mandate from the people does not exist. Political scientist Robert Dahl states the, "no political leader, including the president, is uniquely privileged to say what an election means" (pp. 151-162).

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Conclusion

This book is thoroughly referenced with almost forty pages of notes, which can aid scholars in finding out more details on the topics discussed. After reading this book, I look forward to a 5th edition, of a book helpful to both educators and students.

Note: The partisan nature of most people is something I acknowledge but do not think that trait belongs much to myself. In local and state government posts, as a financial and economic analyst, as well as the time I worked on official reports for federal agencies and for a non-partisan research council, I had to be non-partisan by law. This is second nature to me and so I had the same required outlook when I worked on UN commissioned research in China. My goal is providing objective information on economics and finance. Then I let the political people argue amongst themselves and most political people were professional enough not to try to interfere in my work, though a very few did indeed try to sway my analysis, and to their disappointment, unsuccessfully. Indeed opposing politicians and the media always disciplined those politicians who tried to make economic and financial analysts political.

References

1. Jody C. Baumgartner and Peter L. Francia (2020). *Conventional Wisdom and American Elections: Exploding Myths, Exploring Misconceptions* (Fourth Edition). New York, Rowman & Littlefield. Pages i-xvi and 1-216. ISBN: 978-1-5381-2916-6 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5381-2917-3 (electronic). Available at: [[Link](#)].