

Book Review: How The States Shaped the Nation: American Electoral Institutions & Voter Turnout, 1920-2000 by Melanie Jean Springer

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/10/01/book-review-how-the-states-shaped-the-nation-american-electoral-institutions-voter-turnout-1920-by-melanie-jean-springer/

2014-10-1

With *How the States Shaped the Nation*, **Melanie Jean Springer** looks to place contemporary reforms in historical context and explores how state electoral institutions have been instrumental in shaping voting behaviour throughout the twentieth century. Springer shows that voting patterns can change over time, even if only incrementally, with a one step forward two steps back logic that is often frustrating. **Jeff Lupu** finds this a fascinating read and recommends it to those interested in knowing more about American politics.

How The States Shaped the Nation: American Electoral Institutions & Voter Turnout, 1920-2000. Melanie Jean Springer. University of Chicago Press. 2014.

Find this book:  

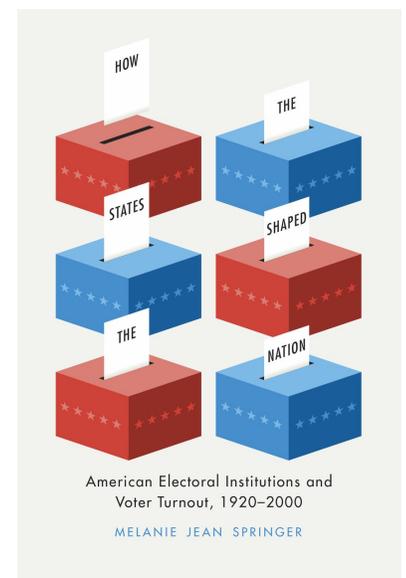
Voting in the United States is strange. A casual glance across the pond shows this to be true, with the century-long struggle of African Americans to gain the right to cast their ballots and the Bush v. Gore election providing two ready and convincing examples. Look deeper, and things get even stranger. This is exactly what [Melanie Jean Springer](#) has done. In *How the States Shaped the Nation*, Springer evaluates eighty years of electoral history in the US, covering most of the twentieth century, from 1920 to the new millennium. It is incisive, well researched, and thorough.

From the start, Springer is careful to point out that when it comes to voting and elections, institutions matter. Both words are emphasised. In discussing institutions, which takes up the best part of the book in one way or another, the word is always plural. One of Springer's main goals is to drill into the reader that the US does not have one set of electoral institutions. Rather, as a result of the country having fifty states, the US in fact has fifty sets of electoral institutions. Analysing the complications and consequences of that fact is one of Springer's main concerns. Her other main concern is how the institutions matter.

If state electoral institutions are the independent variable — the things having effects on other things — then the question of how institutions matter brings us closer to the study's dependant variables. The overarching dependant variable is voter turnout. Take a certain electoral institution — say the state of Georgia's approach to voting qualifications, like property requirements, literacy tests, and poll taxes—and see whether and how it has affected voter turnout in that place over time. This is how the book goes about its business, state-by-state, region-by-region, and institution-by-institution.

Throughout most of the book the reader is left to themselves to make a full picture out of the details of Springer's precise study. The points at which she does this herself, generally at the end of chapters, as well as in a final, book-concluding summary, do much to synthesise the wealth of material that is to be pored over and are to be commended for their readability.

There are three things the reader is left with after they turn page 169 in finishing the book. The first has been mentioned: state electoral institutions matter. The 2000 presidential election is brought up at various points



throughout the book as a reminder that sometimes Americans' votes count in only limited ways, or not at all (Gore won the popular vote, it's worth remembering).



Still, it doesn't get us very far simply knowing that state electoral institutions are where the rubber meets the road, as far as national elections are concerned. This makes Springer's state and regional analyses, her case studies, all the more important. Striking is the true extent to which the Southern states in the US truly are different from the rest of the country. From 1920 to the year 2000, the national average for voter turnout in presidential elections was 55 per cent. In the Southern states it was 37 per cent. Over the same period the national turnout averaged 40 per cent for non-presidential election years, while in the Southern states that figure was only 21 per cent. These figures matter, and Springer goes a long way toward explaining why they've come about. With harrowingly academic tone, Springer explains that 'after decades of limitation it seems it may take more than reduced voting costs to stimulate participation in this region'. History takes a while to undo, she seems to be saying, and what we've tried thus far, especially on the national level, isn't working.

A bit of recent history drives home the final point the reader takes away from *How the States Shaped the Nation*, which is that voter turnout is low, and its prospects bleak. In the book's penultimate paragraph, Springer discusses the 2008 US Supreme Court case of *Crawford v Marion County Election Board*, in which the court upheld an Indiana law that required voters to have photo identification in order to cast their ballots. The case signalled a turn in the wrong direction and, according to Springer, was 'reminiscent of a bygone era of race-based restrictions'. Reaching into 2013, one finds *Shelby County v Holder*. If ever one were to doubt the seriousness with which voting rules in the US are taken, *Shelby County* will disabuse them. The Supreme Court held that section 4 of the Voting Rights Act 1965 was unconstitutional. Within two hours of the decision Texas attorney general Greg Abbott announced that his state would be going ahead with a law requiring voters to present official identification to cast their ballots on Election Day, a law that the Justice Department had, in accordance with the old law, previously found illegal. He also mentioned redistricting maps that would be put into effect. No one had to ask which voters would be least likely to have identification, or most likely to be drawn out of the voting map: minorities. In 2012, the Justice Department found that Mexicans were twice as likely to lack identification and a year earlier a federal court held that Texas's redistricting maps were enacted with 'a discriminatory purpose'.

This is the reality into which readers of Springer's book are thrust. It's not particularly inspiring. Nevertheless, *How the States Shape the Nation* shows that voting patterns can change over time, even if only incrementally, with a one step forward two steps back logic that's maddening in the extreme. The book ends by instructing us that reforms, if they have any chance of increasing voter turnout, should be tailored to state and local levels as much as possible. These are instructions for the bold, but for the sake of American democracy, here's to hoping they're useful.

Jeff Lupo is a graduate of the University of Washington, Seattle, and earned an MSc (Research) in International Political Economy from the LSE in 2012. He has since worked in political risk consulting and completed the Graduate Diploma in Law, awarded with Commendation. He lives in London and plans to work as a commercial solicitor. [Read more reviews by Jeff.](#)

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books