

Danney Goble and James R. Scales. *Oklahoma Politics: A History*. (University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), pp. 351. ISBN-13: 978-0806118246

The contours of Oklahoma politics have undoubtedly changed in the quarter century since the original publication of *Oklahoma Politics: A History*. In 1982, when noted Oklahoma historians Danney Goble and James R. Scales first released this classic account of Sooner state politics, which encompasses a time period ranging from the days of the Twin Territories to the Modern Era, the bulk of Oklahoma's voters remained in the grip of a long and often tumultuous love affair with the Democratic Party. Democrats maintained overwhelming majorities in the State Legislature and six of the eight members of Oklahoma's federal congressional delegation were Democrats. In significant portions of the state, it was virtually impossible to fathom a day when a Republican would be elected to a county office.

Today, however, it is the Republican Party that commands majorities in both chambers of the Legislature for the first time in state history and all but one of Oklahoma's seven congressional delegation members are Republican (the state lost a congressional seat due to the 2000 Federal Decennial Census). In addition, the Republican Party's electoral fortunes have been driven by their new-found electoral advantages in rural Oklahoma. Indeed, it might be argued that Oklahoma has followed the rest of the South in becoming fairly solidly GOP in its voting preferences. Yet, despite the unprecedented rise of the Republican Party and a noticeable shift in voter registration demographics, many of the observations noted in this seminal masterpiece regarding the political nature of Oklahomans remain as true today as when the book was first written.

Oklahoma Politics provides a broad overview of the state's political history. The segmentation of the book correlates with particular historical eras of statehood, with each chapter detailing the various political, social and economic issues that informed the politics of those times. Despite the largely chronological composition of events typical of most history books, Scales and Goble provide a thorough and insightful analysis of past political trends to complement the detailed historical accounts of the aforementioned issues and the individuals involved in the making of Oklahoma's political history. The authors also consistently incorporate election results to assist the reader in processing these analyses, which is particularly useful in understanding local phenomena and issues of class and race.

Upon reading *Oklahoma Politics*, a number of reoccurring themes become apparent. Chief among them is the fact that Oklahoma politics has long been characterized by one-party governance, similar to that of the "Solid South" of the former states of the Confederacy. Scales and Goble, who were known for their arguments that Oklahoma is as much of a culturally southern state as it is a western state, note that aside from a number of relatively isolated electoral anomalies, political power remained firmly in Democratic hands throughout most of the state's history. Despite Oklahoma's progressive constitution and the reform-mindedness of its early years, it did not take long for that spirit to segue to a more conservative approach to governance found in other Southern, predominantly Democratic states.

While there were a number of notable exceptions along the way, such as flirtations with radical factions like the Socialist Party and the Ku Klux Klan, the authors emphasize that a "stubbornly traditional attitude towards governmental policies" was solidified early in the state's history. As typical of "Solid South" states, a persistently conservative approach to race and affection for the patronage system of the "Old Guard" came to dominate many aspects of Oklahoma politics.

Another relevant theme on which the authors focus is the concept of political maturity; that it takes a people both time and history to learn the art of governance. Upon reading *Oklahoma Politics*, the relative inexperience and immaturity of the state's early political culture is apparent. This is clear from the Legislature's overzealous attempts to utilize its impeachment power, both on a number of executives and a seemingly endless array of statewide elected officials, to the resistance

to which the rural-dominated Legislature met its 1960s reapportionment. The authors attribute some of these faults to the state's pervasive and ever-persistent brand of conservative populism, which often manifested itself in the election of grossly under-qualified individuals and in the endless series of referendums peppering voter ballots each election cycle.

To Scales and Goble, it is the frontier spirit and rugged individualism embodied in most Oklahomans that are the contributing factors to the obsession among many past Oklahoma policymakers with fiscal policy. The authors argue that a penchant for limited government, coupled with a "bipartisan hatred of taxes," has come to dominate the history of Oklahoma's politics regardless of partisan allegiances. With the passing of time, however, the authors note that a number of positive reforms have reshaped Oklahoma. For instance, the state's populism has been tempered by the replacement of the patronage system of earlier decades with a state merit system, augmented by court-ordered legislative reapportionment. The reduction of statewide-elected officials and the implementation of judicial reforms as a result of scandals further muted the populist impulses of Oklahoma's political culture.

In many ways, it's hard to imagine a more thorough and comprehensive history of Oklahoma's political evolution than *Oklahoma Politics*. Scales and Goble conclude this classic by noting that: "In the life-span of two generations, Oklahomans had settled a frontier, built a state, and fought a depression and two world wars." In the end, a picture emerges of a state still young and maturing, but whose people largely embody many of the political characteristics of previous generations. The partisan composition of Oklahoma has changed a great deal since 1982. Some would argue that Oklahoma is now a part of a new "Solid GOP South," but while political allegiances shift with time the values held by a people often endure the ages.

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