

Brett S. Sharp, Christopher L. Markwood, and Jan C. Hardt, editors. 2012. *Oklahoma Government and Politics*. Kendall Hunt Publishing, pp. 340.

*Oklahoma Government and Politics* is a one of a kind textbook, which is not unusual with texts focusing on states like Oklahoma or other low-population, mid- and southwestern states. The splendid *Oklahoma Politics and Policies* (1991) by David Morgan, Robert England and George Humphreys is too dated to be considered a viable competitor. The more recent *Oklahoma Government Today*, Centennial Edition (2007) by George Nigh, Carl Reheman and Bob Burke has ceased publication. Thus, by default *Oklahoma Government and Politics*, now in its fifth edition, has no competitors. Fortunately, the authors have provided a text with depth, scope, and balance. However, as with many textbooks on state government, there is room for a number of improvements.

*Oklahoma Government and Politics* is an edited book with several authors contributing chapters. The coverage includes the major governmental institutions, including the legislature, judiciary, executive, public administration and local governments. Also included are federalism, parties and elections, interest groups, campaign finance, the state's tax system and its economic history, Oklahoma's environmental policy, and the use of information technology by local governments. The strength of *Oklahoma Government and Politics* rests with these many fine contributions.

As one would expect in a book that includes a variety of contributors, the chapters are of varying length and quality. Many are teeming with encyclopedic detail. The chapters on the legislature, local governments, and the tax system are examples. The two chapters on the judiciary are presented sequentially and are nicely complimentary. One explains the structure of the state's court system, how its judges are chosen, and the types of cases that come before the courts. The adjacent chapter focuses exclusively on Oklahoma cases that have had a significant impact on U.S. law. The chapter covering Oklahoma's environmental problems offers close inspection of the history and substance of several facets of a significant contemporary state issue. The chapter on information technology and the various ways it is used by local governments is comprehensive and timely. All in all, it is easy to recommend *Oklahoma Government and Politics* to college and university instructors who teach Oklahoma History or State and Local Government. As a colleague of this reviewer confided recently, she just lately became aware of the book and will be adopting it in future classes.

As noted above, this review is not wholly complimentary. However, unlike the opinion expressed by one observer, there is no problem with the length of *Oklahoma Government and Politics*. A 340-page college textbook is not cause for slimming down, unless the quality of the content requires it, which is not the case here. A far more relevant concern is that the book is often too deep in details and too short on narrative. One of the best examples that avoids this problem is the chapter on the state's political economy. It knits together Oklahoma's history, politics, and economic development in a compelling narrative. For future editions, the editors should encourage their contributors to be especially mindful of the need to incorporate diversity for the sake of added interest and variety. The chapters on federalism and policy provide generic information about their subjects, but offer scant information related to Oklahoma. A substantial improvement would be to add Oklahoma-specific background, historical and political analysis, current events, and contemporary state issues. Oklahoma's

political history is rich with events and personalities which can enliven and supplement the treatment of practically any chapter. For example, in the chapter on public administration the authors write generally about “unsung heroes,” yet miss the opportunity to relate the story of how bureaucracies reacted heroically to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

Ironically—and this is mostly tongue in cheek—it might be more fitting if the book were titled just *Oklahoma Government*, because it too often overemphasizes the mechanisms and procedures of state government. The remedy, of course, is to include more politics in the book, paying special attention to contemporary examples and comparisons with other states regarding Oklahoma government and policy outcomes. A similar option would be to add more stand-alone policy chapters. The excellent chapter on Oklahoma’s environment is an example. Chapter-long treatments could include Oklahoma’s universal pre-K program, incarceration rates and prison overcrowding, state-sponsored health care, workers compensation reform, education funding, and so many others. Another approach would be to include brief but learned point-counterpoints, much as the *Tulsa World* has recently brought to its op-ed page.

Less substantive and more idiosyncratic recommendations include eliminating the governor’s foreword. Forwards by sitting elected officials can appear compromising, and may detract from the reputation of independence and objectivity that scholars struggle to preserve. Another suggestion is to improve or remove the 23 short biographical sketches. These “Leadership Profiles,” which appear throughout the book, focus on state citizens who share an estimable record of public service, whether in or out of government. The problem with the profiles is that they range from the absorbing to the lackluster. A few are not only leaden but cross over to political one-sidedness and favoritism. A final suggestion is for more consistent editing. A reader wants to know within a paragraph or two about the theme and supporting subjects of the chapter. The two chapters on

Oklahoma's economy are superb examples because they include strong introductions that clearly set out themes and topics.

While this review may seem to be more critical than complimentary, two conclusions are offered. First, the criticisms are not intended as pejorative; rather, they are given as constructive suggestions for future editions. Second, and most important, instructors of Oklahoma politics are in great need of a quality textbook, and Sharp and his fellow editors have achieved that end through five editions of *Oklahoma Government and Politics*. This reviewer looks ahead expectantly to the sixth.

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