

lowing World War II are simply too similar to the geopolitical realms of the Cold War to engender any new or unexpected patterns. For much of this section, America and "the West" are one and the same. Again, geographically peripheral areas, such as the "polar confrontation" of the Cold War, offer the most compelling and thought-provoking reactions to the nation's "victory" over communism.

But these criticisms are trifling compared to Meinig's overall contribution. This is a text that deserves wide circulation and one that compels others to heed his warnings about excluding geography. Without this perspective it is doubtful that anyone can fully understand America's national contours.

Wisconsin Politics and Government: America's Laboratory of Democracy, by James K. Conant. *Politics and Governments of the American States*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xx, 415 pp. Maps, tables, graphs, bibliography, notes, index. \$70.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

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The most important feature of Wisconsin society, government, and politics in the twentieth century, according to James K. Conant, was its "progressive nature": issue-oriented politics, scandal-free government, efficient and effective administration of policies and programs, consistently large voter turnout, and citizen involvement "in political activity in ways that extended beyond elections." Such an orientation "seems to correspond with the democratic ideal posited by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic work *Democracy in America*," and differentiates it from most other midwestern states. Conant is quick to point out, however, that it has not always been that way and that, by the end of the twentieth century, "some of the Progressive premises or boundaries" were "severely tested or broken" (xv-xvii).

To explain this bipolar pattern, Conant posits an ongoing conflict between the "marketplace" and "commonwealth" conceptions of society and divides Wisconsin's history into "four major periods of experimentation." In the former, politics is a struggle for power and tangible rewards among private interest groups, while the purpose of government is to aggrandize those interests and professional politicians. In the latter, the purpose of politics and government is to protect citizens and public resources from exploitation by those same interests and professional politicians.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, Wisconsin was dominated by lumber, railroad, manufacturing, and other business groups through the regular Republican "machine," which played marketplace politics to the hilt. Between 1900 and 1915, however, "progressives," led by Robert M. La Follette Sr., turned the state into what Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed as "literally a laboratory for wise experimental legislation" for "the social and political betterment of the people as a whole," indelibly imprinting the commonwealth world view upon the state's psyche. Over the next two decades, "progressives" and "stalwarts" struggled for hegemony, until the former, headed by a new generation of La Follettes, restored commonwealth politics during the 1930s. Following another decade of stalemate between the two systems, Democrats, rejuvenated by a major infusion of Progressives and Social Democrats, inaugurated a third period of commonwealth predominance that lasted into the early 1980s. From that point until the end of the century, marketplace politics, orchestrated by four-term Republican Governor Tommy Thompson, regained the upper hand.

Utilizing that explanatory framework, Conant takes readers through the evolution of Wisconsin's constitution, legislature, executive, judiciary, parties, and interest groups. Although the founding constitution has persisted since 1848, it has been amended 132 times; only two of its original 15 articles remain intact. Similarly, early governors had two-year terms and were largely limited to administrative and ceremonial functions, while their present-day successors enjoy four-year terms, prepare the budget, set the legislative agenda, possess a "partial veto" over legislation, and act as "intergovernmental representatives." Conant applies the same treatment to the historical development of the state's social welfare policy, local government, state-local relations, and place in the federal system. Although the book's strength clearly lies in the author's impressive grasp of the "nuts and bolts" of the state's polity, many readers will find his first and last chapters—"The Character of the State" and "Continuing Traditions and Emerging Issues"—to be the most thought provoking.

Despite the resurgence of the marketplace conception during the late twentieth century, Conant concludes, "It seems difficult to imagine that the state's citizens would allow their political institutions to be captured once again by narrow economic interests that manipulate the levers of government for their own gain" (31).