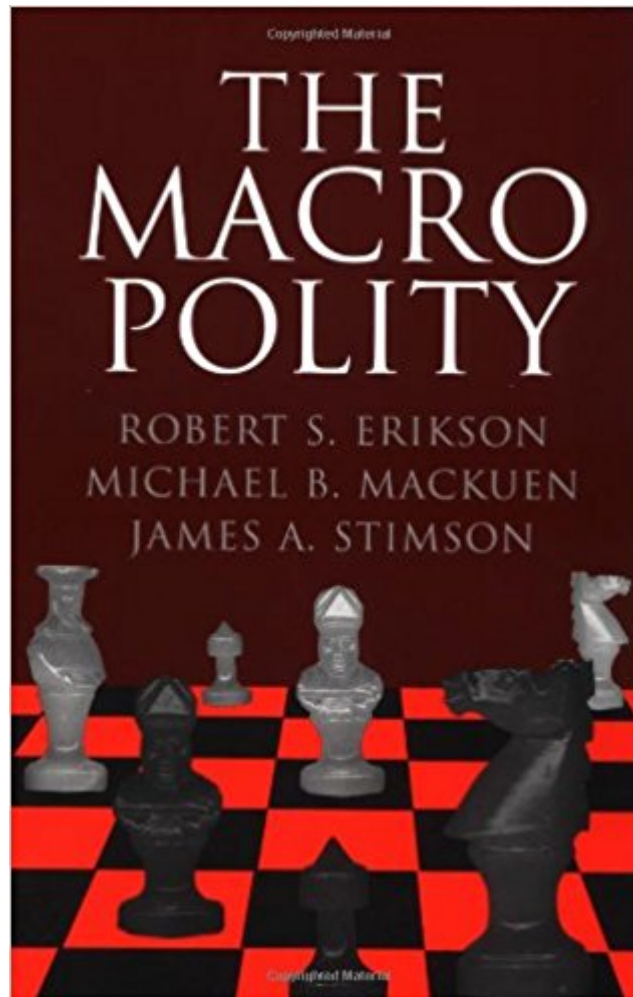


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The Macro Polity (Cambridge Studies In Public Opinion And Political Psychology)



Synopsis

The Macro Polity provides the first comprehensive model of American politics at the system level. Focusing on the interactions between citizen evaluations and preferences, government activity and policy, and how the combined acts of citizens and governments influence one another over time, it integrates understandings of matters such as economic outcomes, presidential approval, partisanship, elections, and government policy-making into a single model. The book's macro and longitudinal focus makes it possible to directly connect the behaviors of electorate and government.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the most interesting and important books on public opinion published in recent years. It is a direct descendant of V. O. Key's wonderful little book, "The Responsible Electorate." Erikson et al. explore the dynamics related to the "macro polity." Many works on political behavior and public opinion focus on individuals, using survey research results. This book aggregates the survey results to the level of the citizenry at large, and traces changes (and their effects) in the public mind over time. The authors follow the public mind from the Eisenhower through the Clinton years. On the one hand, this is only a limited slice of American history. On the other hand, this is the period (starting with Eisenhower) when we have the most useful survey data. This is an academic work, and readers need to understand that. To critique this as too academic is to misunderstand the focus and purpose of this work. Nonetheless, even nonacademics can learn a great deal from this work if

they persevere. Studies of individual citizens' attitudes and behavior are not flattering. Individuals are rather ill-informed, don't have a great deal of accurate knowledge of politics, and express attitudes and opinions that they may not really have. But a study of the "macro polity" yields another picture--of a collective wisdom that is far more astute than the individual level data might suggest. That's a key point of this book (as well as others like Page's and Shapiro's "The Rational Public"). On page xxi, the authors state this explicitly: "It is true that individual Americans have a weak grasp on the essentials of economics and economic policy, and it is also true that Americans, in the aggregate, are highly sensitive to real economic performance."

This is a book that deserves to be influential in the field of political science, for both good and bad reasons. The theories presented here deal with macro-level or system-wide trends in American political behavior. If the authors can be believed, there was little previous work done in this area. Instead, political science focused on the behavior of individuals and then tried to aggregate the resulting data into system-wide theories. The evidence indicates that the behavior of the public is not always "the sum of the parts" and there are specific phenomena at play that influence the larger electorate, at the system level. The authors have conducted an impressive amount of research, which probably took years, including macro-level data about voting patterns, partisanship, ideological trends, presidential approval, and public opinion. Their conclusions about the existence of macro-level phenomena are generally believable and supported by the evidence, and their work will probably prove to be groundbreaking in the field. On the other hand, this book embodies everything that is wrong with the academic side of political science these days. At least the authors will be accepted by their peers who value method more than insight. Here it becomes more important to impress one's peers by piling on endlessly repetitive evidence and trotting out unnecessarily complex statistical equations, all to prop up points that were already made convincingly in prose form. Each chapter in this book makes strong and believable points, but then degenerates into the worst of academic tedium, indicating that the authors chose (or were forced) to please ivory-tower editors and academic committees, rather than people in the outside world who could truly make use of their findings.

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