

Book: *Governing Health: The Politics of Health Policy*

Authors: Carol S. and William G. Weissert

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“People who love sausage and respect the law should never watch either one being made,” is a paraphrase from a statement by Germany’s Chancellor Otto von Bismark (1815-1898). Indeed, to those unfamiliar with how Congress creates laws, the legislative process, once revealed, can be very ugly. Healthcare laws are not born of the system one reads about in high school textbooks or observes in genteel speeches seen on C-Span. In reality, these laws are usually the product of years of behind-the-scenes power struggles, threats, and tough bargaining among the 535 members of Congress, the President, constituents, and special interest groups.

Some see the process as dirty, ineffective, and unfair. Those holding this opinion usually do not understand how the system works. Carol and William Weissert, in *Governing Health: The Politics of Health Policy*, explain how the system works. They do so by describing the power brokers on Capitol Hill: the President, Congressional members, committees, and interest groups to name a few. Then, they describe the formal and informal methods used by these institutions to strongly influence how members vote. This inside story of congressional behavior is sometimes juicy stuff: motivations include influences like presidential pressure, party loyalty, the strong arm of special interest groups (the American Association of Retired Persons has 33 million members, and they vote!), the drive to be re-elected, and quite often the members’ desire to simply write good laws.

The Weisserts season *Governing Health* with numerous anecdotes that aid understanding of the material. For instance, how can Presidents influence congressional activities on healthcare? Take President Reagan. During the Iran-Contra scandal in 1988, the President and his party had much dirt heaped upon them. To clean their sullied reputation--and demonstrate “compassion and family orientation”--the President successfully pushed forward catastrophic healthcare legislation that had long been the passion of the Democratic Party. How can constituents influence healthcare? A loud and insistent constituent population--many elderly and many part of the 33 million member American Association of Retired Persons--complained so loudly about the

Republican-driven catastrophic healthcare laws that an embarrassed Congress quickly repealed the legislation. Anecdotes such as these are on virtually every page of the text.

Governing Health is written by professors for professors/students. It is descriptive, not prescriptive. It is not a “how to” manual. In other words, after finishing this text, readers will not be able to head to Washington DC, strut into a Senator’s office and begin tweaking laws. However, they will gain tremendous understanding of the legislative system that dominates almost every factor of their lives and livelihood, and that is very important. After all, healthcare is the nation’s largest industry. Congress provides this industry with more than half of its revenue and dictates almost all of its paperwork burden. Health professionals should understand the process that creates the laws to which they must adhere, if not to better appreciate and trust the system, then to someday understand how they may change it.

I spoke with the authors recently and learned they are currently writing a third edition to be published this Fall. Additionally, they are working on a new book that focuses almost entirely on how special interest groups influence healthcare policy. *Governing Health* already devotes a full chapter to this fascinating topic. It is one of the more enlightening and entertaining chapters of the book, so it is safe to assume that their upcoming book on the subject will be equally as interesting and valuable.