

# Arkansas Politics and Government

by Diane D. Blair and Jay Barth

2nd Edition

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## ARKANSAS POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

*Politics and Governments  
of the American States*

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DIANE D. BLAIR AND JAY BARTH

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SECOND EDITION

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*For Jim,  
my best teacher about  
Arkansas politics, and about  
most other things as well  
D. D. B.*

*For Diane D. Blair,  
friend and mentor  
W. J. B.*



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## Preface to the Second Edition

Generations of students and scholars of the politics of the South have looked to V. O. Key's *Southern Politics in State and Nation* as the jumping-off point for their investigations since that seminal work was published in the middle of the last century. So too since its 1988 publication has Diane D. Blair's *Arkansas Politics and Government* served as the beginning of the journey for those seeking a better understanding of the politics and government of Arkansas. Diane's analyses of the state's electoral and interest-group dynamics, the governmental structure as framed by the state's constitution, the internal processes of the institutions of state government, Arkansas's place within the federal system, the workings of local government, and the most important areas of state public policy have been the starting point for scholarly analysis or well-informed conversations about any of those topics. Thus, though I felt immensely complimented both personally and professionally by Diane's invitation to co-author the second edition after she became ill in 2000, an element of palpable intimidation also accompanied the opportunity. I was able to partly overcome that anxiety by the experience I had gained in my previous collaborations with Diane, which taught us that there was a general synchrony between our understanding of the most productive ways to analyze Arkansas politics and our writing styles. I hope that the confidence I have consequently brought to this revision is not ill placed and that this edition of Diane's book is one that would have pleased her.

Although the first edition of *Arkansas Politics and Government* remains so fundamentally insightful about the dynamics and structures of the state's governmental system, too much has happened over the past decade and a half for it to remain completely useful for students and scholars attempting

to understand Arkansas politics and government of the early twenty-first century. The departure of the potent Democratic vote-getters who had controlled the state's politics while the remainder of the South veered Republican, the election of one of those Democrats as a two-term U.S. president, fundamental structural changes in two of the three branches of government through constitutional amendment that have had dramatic effects on public policymaking in the state, and numerous consequential demographic and economic changes—all have compelled readers of the first edition to ask at any number of spots, “Well, is that *still* true?” This edition attempts to address the questions raised by these, and many other, shifts in Arkansas politics and government and bring into the analysis the significant amount of excellent research that scholars have completed on Arkansas politics and American state and local government more generally since the publication of the first edition. However, though all of these consequential issues are dealt with in the pages of this text, as the subtitle of this edition of the book indicates, it grapples with the same, still equally pertinent overarching “enigma” laid out in Diane’s preface to the first edition.

For most of Arkansas’s history, most of its citizens were hardworking and hard-pressed farmers, struggling for subsistence against formidable odds. For all of its history as a state, Arkansas has had democratic institutions through which this majority should have been able to elect sympathetic officials, demand attention and assistance, and hold the government accountable. Yet this kind of demand and response has been a rare event rather than a routine occurrence. Anyone with even the most superficial acquaintance with Arkansas knows that its people have always been fierce in the protection of what is theirs, quick to take offense against slight or injury. And yet, despite the state’s proud motto of “Regnat Populus” (the people rule), little evidence could be found in the nineteenth century or for most of the twentieth of either popular assertion of just demands or government provision of necessary and useful services. Indeed, for most of Arkansas’s statehood, state government’s relationship to its people seemed to range from irrelevant to injurious.

The modern era has brought profound political change. There are obvious light-years of difference between a state government that once spent virtually nothing on schools or roads or health and the one that now spends over three billion dollars annually on these and other services. A similarly vast polarity lies between Governor John Roane (1849–52) asserting, “I am convinced, after careful investigation into the history of the common school, that no possible good can come of it or ever can result to the state or any considerable proportion of the people,” and the past three governors choosing to stomp

the state on behalf of excellence in education and between Governor Jeff Davis (1901–7) boasting that “nigger domination will never prevail in this country . . . as long as shotguns and rifles lie around loose and we are able to pull the trigger” and Governor Winthrop Rockefeller (1967–70) leading the singing of “We Shall Overcome” on the capitol steps after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination.<sup>1</sup>

If, as one of Arkansas’s earliest observers reported, “Arkansas will have longer to struggle with the disadvantages that attend to it . . . than other frontier states,” abundant evidence suggests that Arkansas has at last begun to struggle.<sup>2</sup> And, though this work is marginally less optimistic than the first edition in this regard, those struggles are occasionally now successful. For the political scientist, however, and for all serious students of politics, these visible, dramatic symbols of change provoke as many questions as they answer: Why did attentive and useful state government take so long to evolve? Are the changes, obvious to even the most casual contemporary observer, fundamental changes in substance or superficial changes in symbol and style? Have a representative political system and a responsive state government actually been achieved? And if so, have they been secured?

Readers familiar with this book’s first edition will recognize only minimal changes to certain chapters but many alterations in others. Some topics, indeed, required dramatic shifts in the way the political phenomena or institutions are analyzed. But, in testimony to the excellence of Diane’s work, those readers will also note that the general framework of this work is the same as that of the first edition.

In chapter 1 we explore the large questions just raised and also document, through a narrative overview, the extent to which state government has been as much an affliction as an aid to most Arkansas citizens for much of the state’s history. In chapter 2 we offer some social, economic, and political explanations for the curious acquiescence of Arkansas’s people in this ineffectual kind of government. The traditional way of doing politics in Arkansas is described in chapter 3, and the various forces that ushered in the contemporary political system are explored. In chapters 4 and 5 we analyze the results of those changes as they are reflected in campaigns, elections, parties, and the increasingly regional nature of voting behavior. Chapter 6 deals with interest groups, which have become an integral part of contemporary politics.

Whether changes in the political system have produced equally significant changes in actual governance is the subject examined in chapters 7 through 10, which deal with the constitution and the executive, legislative, and

judicial branches of government. Since some of the most important state governmental decisions are made in response to, or reaction against, policies emanating from the national government, the cooperative and combative aspects of Arkansas's federal relationships will be explored in chapter 11. Though the focus of this study is state politics and governance, the public affairs transacted by Arkansas's counties and cities have equally profound consequences for its citizens, as chapter 12 makes clear. To further test whether political changes and institutional reforms have had major substantive impact, we examine in chapter 13 the changing politics of state taxing and spending as well as the state's long (and ongoing) struggle with public education policies.

In chapter 14, we offer an overview of the major characteristics of contemporary politics and government in Arkansas, and of the political future they seem to portend. In chapter 15 we suggest some of the best sources for further research. This is a critical chapter because serious examination of Arkansas's political system remains in its early stages, despite the outstanding research completed during the past decade and a half.

At the close of my preface, I must reiterate the warning and invitation offered in Diane's preface to the first edition:

Arkansas voters are notorious for quickly confounding any assertions about their expected behavior; and the hundreds of "experts" on Arkansas politics who populate every courthouse, campus, and coffee shop in Arkansas (from many of whom [we] have learned much and drawn freely) will be swift in exposing the flaws in [our] analysis. Since such dialogue is essential to democratic health and further learning, it will be welcome. And when error is exposed, all of us "experts" on Arkansas politics can take refuge in the immortal words of one of Arkansas's past political masters: "Just because I said it doesn't make it so."<sup>3</sup>

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## Acknowledgments

Most fundamentally, of course, I acknowledge the mentoring in analyzing and in living Arkansas politics that Diane D. Blair gave me during the years in which we were friends and colleagues. I will forever value the conversations about this work that Diane and I had in the last months of her life. It was a collaborative occasion that allowed me to interact with Diane in a manner that was much closer to the way we interacted before her illness than most of her friends were able to enjoy during those months. The opportunity to complete this project has given me one of the best learning experiences of my life but, more importantly, the chance to work with Diane for months after she was no longer with us in body. (The numerous notes from Diane—some of which forced me to learn at least the basics of the shorthand she often wrote with—I found buried in files as my work on this book continued often brought a smile to my face.) I thank Jim Blair, Bill Kincaid, and the rest of Diane’s family for supporting me in completing this project.

Diane was not the only mentor whom I lost during the time I worked on this project. During the 2000–2001 academic year, the American Political Science Association’s Steiger Congressional Fellowship gave me the opportunity to work in the U.S. Senate for Senator Paul David Wellstone. Paul taught me much about public service, the way that legislative actions improve or worsen the lives of those living far away from Washington (or Little Rock), and the study of politics. I miss Paul and Sheila Wellstone’s friendship tremendously.

Paul was not my only teacher during my time in Washington. The Wellstone staff members with whom I worked, particularly Jill Morningstar, taught me much about the skills needed to analyze public policy, which helped shape portions of this work, as well as about the importance of



maintaining passion and commitment in one's work in politics and government. I thank all of the Wellstone staffers—as well as the many staff members in other offices with whom I worked on education and civil rights policy—for the kindness they showed me during that year, and I thank the American Political Science Association for providing me with that wonderful opportunity.

Grant Cox, my research assistant throughout the completion of this second edition, proved himself to be a wonderful young scholar to work with. His steadiness and diligence in his work, his attention to detail, and his grand sense of humor combined to make him a perfect research assistant. This task would have been immeasurably more difficult without Grant's work and support. I wish to thank the Committee on Faculty Grants at Hendrix College whose funding helped to support Grant's work during the summer of 2002. Heather Miles was Diane's research assistant on the first edition of this book; her hard work continues to reveal itself here.

Several individuals with expertise in areas covered by this work showed their generosity by taking the time to read and critique portions of the manuscript during its formative stages. I am deeply indebted to Roby Brock, Arthur Burris, Chuck Cliett, Ernie Dumas, Art English, Margie Ferguson, Brian Greer, Janine Parry, Bill Schreckise, Baxter Sharp, Jeff Smith, and Robert Wright for the feedback that improved this work. Of course, any errors of fact or interpretation herein are those of this author.

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I cannot thank enough the students at Hendrix College who have brought such joy to my professional and personal life through their enthusiasm for the study of politics and for their deep civility and kindness to me. The academic skill of the students with whom I have had the opportunity to work in my life as a professor is evidenced by the fact that several works written by them are cited in this book. The fact that several of those writings have been published shows that others have also recognized the quality of their work. Dozens of other students have provided less tangible inspiration to me by keeping mine that relatively rare kind of job that truly makes me want to drive to work (almost) every day.

As it happens, I met Chuck Cliett just weeks after taking on this project. His interest in hearing me talk about this book as we toured the Lyndon B. Johnson Ranch just hours after first meeting was a good omen for our relationship. That he has remained unfailingly interested in and supportive of my work on it—despite the hours it has taken me away from him—is only one of the signs of how wonderful a partner he is.

Finally, my mother and maternal grandparents have given their loving support to all that I have undertaken in my life, including this project. With time, I have also come to realize that they have much to do with my interest in Arkansas politics and in public service. I was being toted around to campaign events before I can even remember and, soon thereafter,

was being voluntarily taken to county party committee meetings, the night-before-the-primary political speeches on the grounds of the Saline County Courthouse, and city board meetings. And, in any variety of ways, my family members were constantly engaged in or talking about public service of some sort, showing me that government at all levels can make Arkansans' lives better (or worse). But, more than a love of politics and an awareness of the importance of public service, they have given me love.

Jay Barth

ARKANSAS POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT