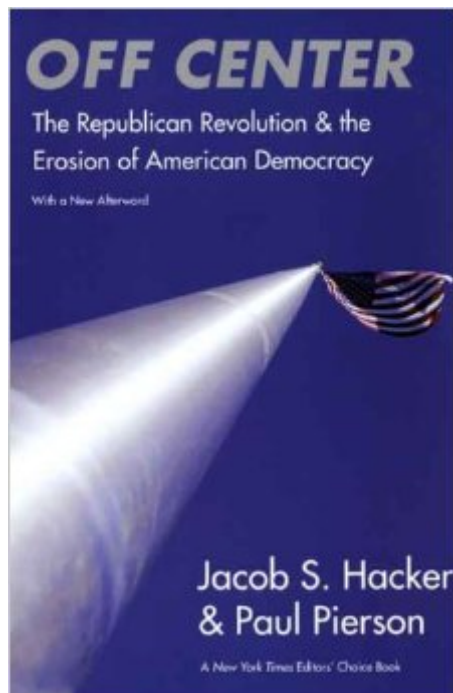


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Off Center: The Republican Revolution And The Erosion Of American Democracy; With A New Afterword



Synopsis

The Republicans who run American government today have defied the normal laws of political gravity. They have ruled with the slimmest of majorities and yet have transformed the nation's governing priorities. They have strayed dramatically from the moderate middle of public opinion and yet have faced little public backlash. Again and again, they have sided with the affluent and ideologically extreme while paying little heed to the broad majority of Americans. And much more often than not, they have come out on top. This book shows why—and why this troubling state of affairs can and must be changed. Written in a highly accessible style by two professional political scientists, *Off Center* tells the story of a deliberative process restricted and distorted by party chieftains, of unresponsive power brokers subverting the popular will, and of legislation written by and for powerful interests and deliberately designed to mute popular discontent. In the best tradition of engaged social science, *Off Center* is a powerful and informed critique that points the way toward a stronger foundation for American democracy.

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Customer Reviews

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson have written a distinctly unusual book. Political scientists don't often write books that take sides in political arguments, and when they do, they usually don't do any better at it than common or garden pundits. It's hard to combine the attention to detail and to careful argument that academics are supposed to have with a passionate concern for the results of the fight. *Off Center* pulls off both. On the one hand, it is very clearly the work of people who have

thought carefully and hard about how politics works. There's a depth of analysis here that's completely absent from the common or garden partisan bestseller-wannabe. But on the other, it doesn't pull its punches. Hacker and Pierson have no compunctions in arguing that the current Republican hegemony is dangerous, and needs to be rolled back. (rest of review below fold) They start by examining the conventional wisdom that American politics has strong centripetal forces, so that political parties have strong incentives towards moderation. According to both centrist pundits and many political scientists, parties that don't cater for the moderate voter should get booted out of office. This political commonplace doesn't appear to be true any more, to the extent that it ever was. The Republicans have been transformed over the last twenty years from a loosely organized coalition in which moderates appeared to have the upper hand, to a party that is astonishingly well disciplined by the standards of American political history and dominated by right-wing radicals. How has this happened? Hacker and Pierson immediately discard two common explanations, neither of which is supported by the facts.

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson's highly readable book is a timely look at how extremists pulled the Republican Party to the right--and are now pulling the country along. Even if it does not reflect a majority of Americans (who have more liberalized attitudes on abortion, contraception, and GLBT issues) the right learned that who is in control ultimately decides the agenda. Room in the 'big tent' for moderates in the mold of William Weld and Gerald Ford is rapidly shrinking today; the official party machinery does not recognize their positions on social issues as 'good policy'. That shrinking environment produces an extreme polarization. Ironically as they accuse the Democratic party of being 'extremist left-wingers' the Republican Party moves ever-further to the right. Flying in the face of conventional electoral wisdom (which says the most voters are in the middle) this strategy has only become more pronounced in the past years. The strategy is abetted by very careful media positioning. Using legislative leadership and media allies (ahem...Fox News) these extremists are able to convince a majority of the American public to 'trust us'. In other words, how a policy is sold becomes more important than that policy's actual effects upon the American people. We saw this both with President Bush's tax cuts package and the war on terror, both of which were originally adopted without significant visible public dissent 'We' are convinced that 'we' are included in the people to actually benefit from a bill---despite being in a much lower economic bracket. I also appreciated their examination of the political role of agencies.

You can ignore some of the more vitriolic reviews of this political science treatise, ranting either for

or against, just because it criticizes the Republicans. Such reviews are from pundits who read a lot of popular commentary, and think they understand real politics. There is a very large difference between political commentary, which is the sloganeering of popular observers ranging from Michael Moore to Ann Coulter, and political science, which is backed up by solid academic theory and scientific evidence. Those of us familiar with academic dissertations in this field will be pleasantly surprised by the readability of this one. If you're also exasperated by the continually lowest-common-denominator jingoism of today's political discourse, then you'll also be surprised by the strength of this book's positions. Hacker and Pierson explain, from a true political science perspective, the inordinate power of the ultraconservatives in today's political environment, and how this is possible when they espouse policies that are so far from the ideological "center." The authors provide convincing evidence that the Republicans' true success has arisen not from connecting with voters on real issues, but by consolidating power from within the party, and by manipulating governmental rules and procedures. The far-Right Republicans have also bullied their more moderate colleagues into taking more extreme stances, thus leaving ultra-Rightists as the only choice for more moderate voters who lean naturally toward the Republicans or don't wish to vote for the Democrats. Therefore, the far-Right has succeeded in advancing an extreme economic and military ideology that is far from the Centrist view of the vast majority of Americans.

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