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Formative Acts: American Politics in the Making

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Political actors are a diverse lot, animated and engaged by the prospect of change. Operating inside and outside the government, they are out to instigate change or inhibit it, to promote or deflect it, to channel or absorb it. Their interactions keep the American polity in a perpetual state of development, rendering it always to some degree unsettled. In the past, the study of American political development has treated political institutions and ideas as disembodied subjects. In *Formative Acts*, leading scholars in the field seek to refocus the debate on the political agency of people, analyzing various modes of action and various sites of interaction with an eye to their transformative potential.

Seventeen essays illuminate critical junctures in American political development—from the social movements for women's suffrage, civil rights, and workers' rights, to Reconstruction, to the regulation of prescription drugs—as vantage points from which to examine how change is enacted. Contributors question not simply how political actors behave but also how and to what extent their actions change the American polity itself. At the same time, the transformative act is presented as larger than any one actor or group of actors; often the act of transformation involves many actors and a panoply of motives.

Three concepts claim center stage: political entrepreneurship—especially as it directs attention to ambiguity and malleability in the rules of action found in any complex institutional setting; political leadership—specifically the conundrum of democratic leadership; and political agency—particularly the strongly voluntaristic construction of that concept found within American political culture. The authors focus on each of these categories to link the study of political action more effectively to our understanding of the formation and reformation of American government and politics.

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