

# The Academy of Political Science

475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274  
(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · [aps@psqonline.org](mailto:aps@psqonline.org) · <http://www.psqonline.org>

## *POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY*

---

Volume 124 · Number 1 · Spring 2009

---

No part of this article may be copied, downloaded, stored, further transmitted, transferred, distributed, altered, or otherwise used, in any form or by any means, except:

- one stored electronic and one paper copy of any article solely for your personal, non-commercial use, or
- with prior written permission of The Academy of Political Science.

*Political Science Quarterly* is published by The Academy of Political Science. Contact the Academy for further permission regarding the use of this work.

---

*Political Science Quarterly*

Copyright © 2009 by The Academy of Political Science. All rights reserved.

## Book Reviews

**Imagining America in 2033: How the Country Put Itself Together after Bush** by Herbert J. Gans. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2008. 224 pp. \$24.95.

This intriguing book is unusual, even a bit odd, and certainly difficult to review. Herbert Gans contributes to a very small genre, perhaps one he has just invented, that he calls a “realistic utopia.” The term is revealing; *Imagining America* does not fully resemble Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* or Sir Thomas More’s original *Utopia*, because too many things go wrong or too many desirable outcomes have not transpired in Gans’s America of 2033. Still, *Imagining America* envisions a country that has gone through three relatively successful and attractive presidencies since that of George W. Bush, and is in the middle of a fourth. Two ex-presidents are Democrats, one is a woman, and the new Democratic president had a Mexican migrant grandfather. (We hear little about the one-term Irish Republican president.) The book is a narrative history of what purportedly happened during these post-Bush administrations; it is an exercise of “mixing estimation, projection, and imagination” (p. xi).

In Gans’s realistic utopia, the United States remains imperfect in 2033. Inequalities persist; the economy is “fragile” (p. 3); the “budget deficit still grows periodically” (p. 6); and “petty corruption” and “self-interested agendas” still “lurk” (p. 9). Nevertheless, it has improved greatly since the dark days of the early 2000s. There is less political polarization and more public trust in government; inequalities of race, class, gender, immigration status, and power have declined; politicians are more responsive to the public, or at least to “citizen lobbies” (p. 4); the United States shares power internationally with other countries; America combats terrorism through intelligence operations instead of war.

Most of the book details the policies and political practices that have led to these desirable outcomes; Gans’s point is to promote these policies and practices so that the United States can actually achieve what he has imagined that it will have achieved by 2033 (verb tenses are complicated here!). Policies include labor-intensive public employment in such things as small classes in public schools, day care, and environmentally friendly energy creation. There is an Earned Estate Tax Credit, in which every parent is enabled to leave \$10,000 (soon to be raised) to each child that he or she has brought up. Presidents have

proposed an Obscene Profits Tax, and persuaded the National Science Foundation to launch a grants program to give the idea scientific legitimacy. The fight against terrorism is now analogized to concerns about dramatic earthquakes on the West Coast—a danger to be carefully monitored, controlled where possible, but largely taken for granted as a background condition of ordinary life.

America in 2033 is in some ways more democratic. A set of think tanks that call themselves the TLC (Tiny Liberal Conspiracy) have grown into a major pressure group and idea-generating body called the Democracy Project. Each president is responsive to this new force, although over and over “Congress almost always slowed down the White House’s initiative” (p. 29, and many other places in the text). Thus Gans envisions a plebiscitary democracy with a strong president at its center; other elected representatives seem to be mostly cautious, obstructionist, and narrow-minded. Public opinion is largely channeled through advocacy and interest groups that connect directly with the president and vice president. The presidents are seeking approval of a new preamble and six amendments to “updat[e] the Constitution” (p. 190); these would guarantee full employment, equal outcomes to match the promise of equal rights, fractional voting in the Senate and electoral college, caps on campaign spending, and other mechanisms to spread political participation and economic resources.

*Imagining America* is clever, thought-provoking, and a bit tendentious. As a political scientist, I worry about the excessive reliance on the presidency and dismissal of Congress. And if my own policy preferences differed more from Gans’s, I would worry about whether a polity can sustain full employment and high levels of government spending without excessive inflationary pressures or capital flight. Nevertheless, the balance between realism and utopianism is nicely maintained, and in my view, the United States would indeed be a better country if many of the concrete ideas here came to fruition.

JENNIFER L. HOCHSCHILD  
*Harvard University*

**Unconventional Wisdom: Facts and Myths About American Voters** by Karen M. Kaufmann, John R. Petrocik, and Daron R. Shaw. New York, Oxford University Press, 2008. 272 pp. Cloth, \$99.00; paper, \$21.95.

Most political science books are written for professional scholars and graduate students. Outside of undergraduate textbooks, efforts to explain political science findings to a broader audience are few and far between. Happily, this book is an exception to that rule. Recognizing that the media, political consultants, and self-designated pundits too often define conventional wisdom about contemporary elections, the authors of *Unconventional Wisdom* set out to correct the most common myths with data analysis of their own and findings