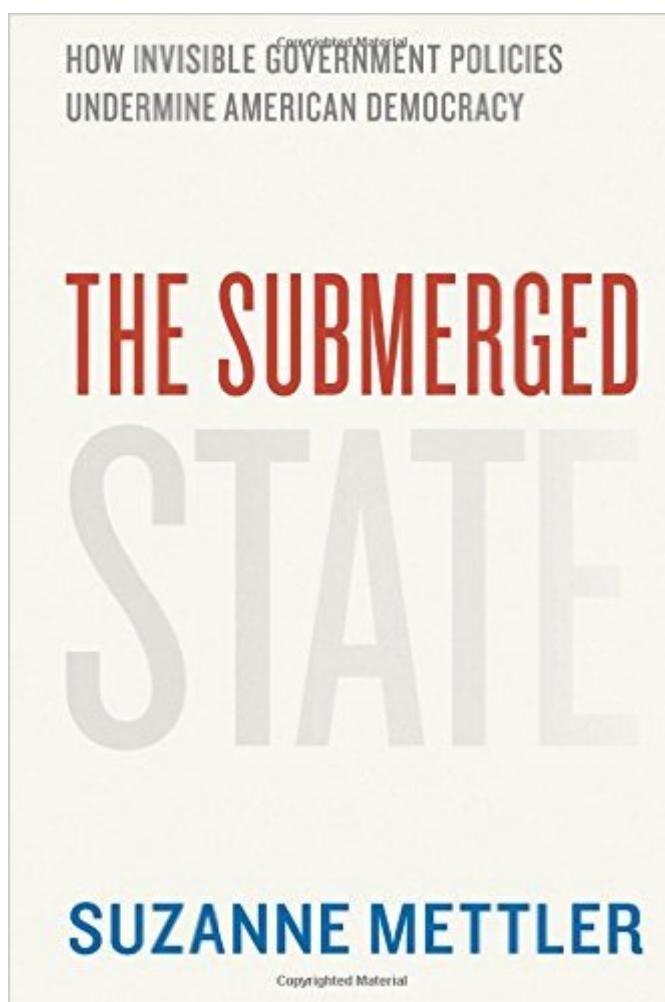


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The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy (Chicago Studies in American Politics)



Synopsis

“Keep your government hands off my Medicare!” Such comments spotlight a central question animating Suzanne Mettler’s provocative and timely book: why are many Americans unaware of government social benefits and so hostile to them in principle, even though they receive them? The Obama administration has been roundly criticized for its inability to convey how much it has accomplished for ordinary citizens. Mettler argues that this difficulty is not merely a failure of communication; rather it is endemic to the formidable presence of the “submerged state.” In recent decades, federal policymakers have increasingly shunned the outright disbursing of benefits to individuals and families and favored instead less visible and more indirect incentives and subsidies, from tax breaks to payments for services to private companies. These submerged policies, Mettler shows, obscure the role of government and exaggerate that of the market. As a result, citizens are unaware not only of the benefits they receive, but of the massive advantages given to powerful interests, such as insurance companies and the financial industry. Neither do they realize that the policies of the submerged state shower their largest benefits on the most affluent Americans, exacerbating inequality. Mettler analyzes three Obama reforms—student aid, tax relief, and health care—to reveal the submerged state and its consequences, demonstrating how structurally difficult it is to enact policy reforms and even to obtain public recognition for achieving them. She concludes with recommendations for reform to help make hidden policies more visible and governance more comprehensible

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Review for "The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine

Democracy, Suzanne Mettler came across this wonderfully written book by Suzanne Mettler while browsing the internet for a list of all the major government social policies. Only days earlier, I had been down to the local board of elections to vote for the next President of the United States and other government officials. While standing in line, along with candidate information, I was handed a pamphlet about Frederick Douglass Republicans. I was not aware then, as I am now, that that little pamphlet would lead me to the work of Mettler. In the minds of many American citizens, Republicans represent the party of less government spending and involvement in the private lives of its citizens. While Democrats are generally thought of as the party favoring government involvement mainly through social welfare entitlement programs...more spending. However, Suzanne Mettler's book elucidates the fact that the U.S. government is also, primarily, the invisible supporter of social programs that are incentivized and delivered through private individuals and organizations. Uncle Sam majorally provides funding for thousands of activities that are actually social programs. To many citizens, these programs float beneath their perception regarding the involvement of government, because they are only made visible through banks, businesses, contractors and other entities that directly interface with the public. Because of this, Mettler states that it is beyond time for evidence-based policy making that restores the connection between government and its citizens. This connection she says, will give citizens the capacity to be more deeply involved in the political process and to have their voices actually heard.

It doesn't take a pundit to know that American politics are screwed up beyond measure. Congress is stuck in gridlock, the economy is stalled, elections are decided by culture war attack ads, and politics itself is derided as a pursuit for lying hustlers. Everybody has a a scapegoat, but Mettler actually has some evidence backing her theory. The key issue is not the government we see, but the government we don't, the vast tangle of tax breaks, public-private partnerships, and incentives that Mettler deems 'the submerged state'. The size of the submerged state is astounding, 8% of the GDP, or half the size of the visible state (Medicare, social security, Medicaid, the military, servicing the debt, and the relatively minuscule discretionary funding that covers everything else the government does, from transportation to education to NASA and foreign aid). Mettler deploys economic and social statistics to show that for all it's expense, the submerged state is a failure on

nearly every level. Whatever your politics, there is something to dislike about the submerged state. It represents a transfer of wealth from the poor to the wealthy, when most Americans abstractly support reducing inequality. It is a distortionary government influence on the workings of the free market, without even the relative clarity of direct purchases or regulations. It often fails to accomplish stated policy goals of improving access to education, healthcare, or housing. It leads to civic disengagement, as those who benefit fail to see how the government has helped them, or how they can meaningfully impact politics through voting. And above all, it is corrupt, as it replaces broad public participation with the lobbying of narrowly constituted wealthy interests groups.

President Obama came into office with a social welfare policy agenda aimed at reconstituting a conglomeration ('submerged state') of existing federal policies that incentivize and subsidize activities engaged in by private actors and individuals. Efforts to restructure the political economy via taxation, higher education policy, and health care, he entered an area presenting immense obstacles to reform. For much of the public, delivery within those areas has failed to meet the high expectations surrounding him when he took office. As of 2008, social (non-business) tax expenditures accounted for 7.4% of GDP, the largest emanating from the non-taxable nature of health insurance benefits provided by employers, followed by the home mortgage interest deduction, and then tax-free employer-provided retirement benefits. (Tax expenditures for business, such as those for the oil and gas industry, make up another 1%.) These should be added to the 17.1% of GDP spent on government welfare programs (1995). In addition, the Higher Education Act of 1965 gave incentives to banks to lend to students at low interest rates; this was followed by 'Sallie Mae' to provide a secondary market for such. Then we have the Earned Income Tax Credit. Obama's first problem came from intense polarization, combined with unequal representation in the Senate from conservative, relatively low-population states, and the ability to impede the majority through filibuster via only 41 votes - an obvious target for lobbyists (about \$17 billion spent 1998-2009 by the top five sectors). Few organizations, however, represent the general public on social welfare issues, especially those within the submerged state.

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