



Journal of Veterans Studies

Review by Phillip A. Olt

Congress and U.S. Veterans: From the GI Bill to the VA Crisis

Lindsey Cormack | Praeger, 2018 | 290 pp. ISBN: 9781440858369

Federal policy has a profound impact on the lived experiences of American military veterans. Political parties may have varied agendas to serve their own ends, but the legislation that emerges from them guides and funds the medical care, educational benefits, and other arenas of veterans' lives. Thus, studying federal veterans' policy is akin to studying a creek by going to the spring where it starts. Policy, at that point of origin, guides the content, direction, and pace of everything downstream.

Congress and U.S. Veterans: From the GI Bill to the VA Crisis by Lindsey Cormack, contains a thorough examination of federal veterans' policy from 2009 to 2017. Cormack argues that any consideration of politics in modern America must be done with heavy filtration, cutting through deliberate ambiguities and electioneering in the messaging. Veterans' issues are no different. Indeed, the two-party system has created an apparent divergence in perception—Republicans communicating themselves as the party for veterans, while the Democrats introduced 60% of the veteran-related legislation in Congress during the years of the study. Thus, she says, the apparent discrepancy between public perception and Congressional activity is important to explore in order to check perceptions with reality and develop a coherent, effective path forward for veterans' policy.

The author, Lindsey Cormack, is an assistant professor of political science and director of the Diplomacy Lab at the Stevens Institute of Technology. Her expertise exists in the communication of policy from the legislative branch of government, and she used that expertise as a tool to investigate what she described as the "oddities around veterans' politics and policies in the United States" (p. ix). As she has no apparent prior experience with the research of, or practice with veterans, her expertise relevant to this book rests in the study of governmental communication, which served as a vehicle for the content here on veterans.

Due to the small body of literature on veterans' issues from the political science perspective, Cormack sought to consider the background of veterans' issues in American politics, analyze legislators' approaches to veterans' issues, and identify the interplay of party politics with the address of veterans' issues in Congress. The target audience for the work was construed in the broadest sense—the public and policymakers. Integrating the purpose with the audience, Cormack wrote the book to help inform the public on policy related to veterans' issues in order to improve the development and implementation of future policy. The book is structured into four sections: historical review of veterans' policy and approaches to policy, ongoing efforts to change veterans' policy, proposal and analysis of the author's Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork, and an examination of case studies illustrating the theory.

In her survey of federal veterans' policy, Cormack noted the importance of veterans' policy, given that veterans uncommonly have bipartisan support both in Congress and among the public. The creation of the Veterans Bureau in 1920 centralized veterans' policy, leading to the later development of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The practical enactment of veterans' policy then emanates in three arenas: healthcare, burial, and benefits—most prominently including pension and education benefits.

Efforts to change veterans' policy face numerous challenges due to the interplay among the many important and vocal constituencies. The veteran community will obviously prioritize spending on veterans' services. However, legislators operate out of interest to those who they represent—who are diversely interested in veterans' issues—which then affects their own re-election or re-appointment efforts. Special-interest lobbying groups also have a significant impact on determining the direction of veterans' policy. Ultimately, the public gives wide support across political affiliation for veterans, but often veterans' policy issues are caught up in partisan debates on issues such as the national budget. Veterans and their lobbying groups, however, tend to have a high level of political engagement, which works in combination with bipartisan public support to generally enact policy that is favorable to veterans. Despite this relative support for veterans in federal policy, perceptions of the effectiveness in implementing veterans' policy through the VA is in rapid decline.

In the analysis of data on Congressional communications and actions on veterans' issues, Cormack noted that despite bipartisan support for veterans, the Republican Party had come to be seen as the pro-veteran party. However, while Congressional Republicans brought up veterans more frequently in their communications, Congressional Democrats actually submitted more legislative proposals on behalf of veterans. From these data sets, Cormack proposed the Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork.

Three concepts explain the theory: (1) "the way constituents understand Congress relies more on what members of Congress *say* than on what members of Congress *do*" (p. 125); (2) "Conservative principles and modern Republican Party demands make it harder to actually *legislate* in a way that benefits veterans" (p. 135); and (3) "Compared to congressional Democrats, Republicans are better at mentioning veterans' issues in constituent communications, and the public has little way of distinguishing between such communicative acts and more programmatic legislation" (p. 135). Unpacking these elements, each Congressperson has a finite amount of space that may be given to issues in communications with their constituents, and Republicans devote more of theirs to veterans. However, Congressional Democrats do not have to grapple with party policy issues that conflict with veterans' services—such as reducing the size of government or not spending on social entitlement programs—allowing them to actually introduce more pieces of legislation for veterans. Because the public is far more likely to be aware of communications than the introductions of legislation, the Republican Party had come, and continues to be seen as the party for veterans, while actually performing less legislative legwork for them.

Cormack provided two case studies to illustrate the complex web of veterans' policy issues and the Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork: The Post-9/11 GI Bill and the VA health care scandal beginning in 2014. With the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Congressional Republicans paid greater lip service to the veterans' education benefits as measured by counting mentions in official communications, while Congressional Democrats did more legwork as measured by counting the number of bills introduced on the matter. However, as Cormack did further analysis, neither Democrat nor Republican party affiliation seemed to be the best explanatory factor for differences in lip service and legwork on this specific issue.

In the second case study, Cormack examined the VA healthcare scandal. In the 1990s, the VA struggled to keep up with veterans' healthcare needs, as "From 1990 to 2000, the number of primary care visits [at the VA] increased by 50 percent, whereas the number of primary care providers only increased by 9 percent" (p. 192). The wars of the 2000s and 2010s, only exacerbated this problem, leaving many VA facilities unable to meet operational requirements. In 2014, news broke out of the Phoenix VA hospital that quantitative data points used as indicators of performance were being altered to obscure failures to properly serve veterans. In response, Congressional Republicans quickly put out specific communications about the issue, whereas Congressional Democrats

responded in a more reserved fashion and focused on general statements of supporting veterans. In corresponding legwork, Congressional Republicans introduced far fewer pieces of legislation than Democrats before the 2014 scandal, but Republicans introduced more legislation than Democrats in the 114th Congress immediately following it.

While the volume of data was vast and the analysis of it meticulous, Cormack's treatment of veterans' policy in the context of national politics, may have taken too narrow an approach to the data and seemed to consider a very narrow band of explanations. Cormack insinuated throughout the book that America's veterans supported the Republican Party primarily because they saw Congressional Republicans talk more about veterans' issues, despite those Congressional Republicans introducing far fewer pieces of legislation affecting veterans than their Congressional Democrat counterparts. In essence, Congressional Republicans were unintentionally—or perhaps even intentionally—leading veterans on to gain their support. This critique is not meant, however, to suggest flaws in the data sets used to count instances of communication or legislation introduction; rather, Cormack seemed too satisfied with those simple quantitative measures to generate a theory with broad implications.

At times, Cormack overstated the theory, such as when she wrote, "it does not appear that the Republican Party has earned the support of veterans by passing favorable veterans' legislation" (p. 229). That does not appear to be supported by the research presented in the book. The Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork suggested that there is a weighting toward lip service by the public, but it does not account for all of the support of veterans toward the Republican Party. In this binary approach to counting communications versus legislative introductions, Cormack acknowledges that lip service only "partially" accounted for veterans' support of the Republican Party, leaving a role for Republican legwork.

There also appear to be other plausible explanations for veterans' support for the Republican Party as addressed in the Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork, but there was almost no space devoted to considering alternate explanations. For example, Cormack did not consider how veterans care for military and veterans' issues, not just veterans' issues. Without considering party relationships to the military and military funding, she may have missed an important, alternate explanation for veteran support of the Republican Party.

While Congressional Democrats introduce more legislation related to veterans, Congressional Republicans support greater funding and staffing of the military. This would seem to be an unexamined, plausible explanation for why veterans tend to be more supportive of the Republican Party, rather than simply believing in communications that are not followed by commensurate actions. There was no consideration of patriotic traditions associated with both the Republican Party and the military, and other related political issues were not discussed, such as approaches to Constitutional interpretation, which might lead veterans to look more favorably on Congressional Republicans than Congressional Democrats.

Cormack's evaluations of lip service and legwork were too dominantly quantitative with too little—though some—attention given to the substance or success of legislative legwork. Her metrics for evaluation reward quantity over focus in the legislative process. It is then difficult to weight mentions in numerous pieces of legislation that are not passed and/or have almost no impact against more successful legislative attempts. Twelve pieces of legislation to reduce funding for the VA would count as more legwork than a single piece of legislation to significantly increase funding. For example, Cormack shared the counts of mentions in communication and the number of pieces of legislation introduced (p. 149), but she did not evaluate what was mentioned or the content of the legislation. Cormack engaged a qualitative concept in the "Substantive" section (pp. 112–113), but again, this was a very broad categorization with an emphasis on counting. In short, I found the

argument unconvincing that a qualitative evaluation could be gained strictly from counting a relatively small number of legislative actions, as the author only noted nine legislative acts during that period that she believed could be described as substantive.

Despite the limitations noted here, this book was perhaps one of the best summaries of the complexity of veterans' policy enactment, wherein Cormack described it as "complicated, time-consuming, and expensive" (p. 18). The quantitative assessment of volume metrics for Congressional parties' relationships with veterans was extremely thorough and enlightening. The resulting Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork would likely be transferrable to other areas of policy study and could reasonably be explored through further quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Largely, the book did fulfill its purpose. However, the narrowly defined metrics of counting communications and introduced legislation limited the quality and general applicability of the Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork that was generated. There were places where an over-reliance on quantitative metrics did not provide adequate insight to evaluate the data or claims. However, Cormack's hope that "this book serves to spread some light on the sometimes-obscured corners of veterans' politics and policies" was certainly fulfilled (p. 229). The Theory of Lip Service versus Legwork is an important contribution to our understanding of veterans' policy and the surrounding politics; however, much more work is needed to evaluate both the theory and the interplay of partisan politics with veterans' policy in a more well-rounded manner.

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