Combining a rational-choice approach with extensive empirical testing, Wayne Francis examines the legislative committee "game" in the United States, arguing that within the constitutional context rational behavior leads to decentralized agenda setting. The committee system represents the linchpin in this decentralization, and Francis charts the flow of decision making from individuals in subcommittees to full committees to the entire legislature. He employs all fifty state legislatures as a principal data base for this study, including a sample survey of over two thousand state legislators, committee assignment information from all fifty states, and other special collections of official or semi-official data. This overall survey is complemented by the literature on Congress and a more intensive study of two specific state legislatures.

The leadership sets decentralizing events in motion at the beginning of each session by accommodating member requests for committee assignments and appointments as much as possible. Members sort themselves into committees and subcommittees that express their primary legislative interests and sponsor legislation more likely to be assigned to their own committees, enhancing their chances of obtaining committee approval. In addition, it is in the interest of any given committee to allow other committees to have their way if reciprocal treatment can be assured, as Professor Francis's evidence shows in a number of ways. Majority party legislators prefer committee decisions over party caucus decisions because this decentralized decision making produces a higher bill passage rate, an important factor in assessing member satisfaction with outcomes.
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Ohio State University Press
Columbus