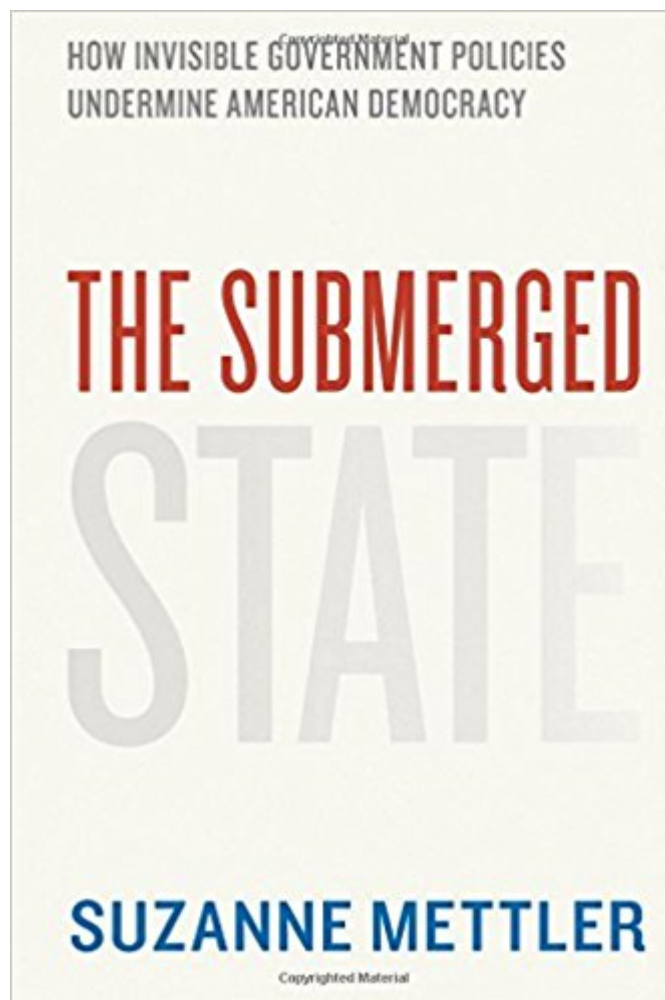




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# The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy (Chicago Studies In American Politics)



## 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.

## Book Information

Series: Chicago Studies in American Politics

Paperback: 176 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press (October 1, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0226521656

ISBN-13: 978-0226521657

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 12 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #109,292 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #150 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Policy #191 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Economic Policy

## Customer Reviews

“The Submerged State is a vitally important analysis for anyone who has bemoaned the inertia and inequities of modern US politics.” • (Times Higher Education) “[I]nformative [and] engaging. . . . This is an important, well-reasoned, welcome volume. Highly recommended.” • (D. R. Imig Choice) “Mettler demonstrates convincingly that the submerged state perpetuates economic inequality as well as confusion, ignorance, and apathy. The average citizen would benefit greatly if, as far as possible, Mettler’s prescriptions for the reduction of the submerged state were to be effected.” • (Ursula Hackett Oxonian Review) “Important and provocative.” • (Jeffery A. Jenkins, University of Virginia Congress & the Presidency) “Why do Americans find government so baffling and irritating—even though many of us depend on public programs for a secure retirement, an affordable mortgage, or a college loan? In this timely and important book, political scientist Suzanne Mettler explains how the United States has come to rely on hidden, indirect policies that privilege special interests but puzzle regular citizens. American democracy can do better, and she shows how. Politicians and the public alike have much to learn from her brilliant and engaging analysis.” • (Theda Skocpol, Harvard University) “Americans want government policies to be transparent, straightforward, and fair, but many social programs are confusing and opaque and shower benefits disproportionately on the well-to-do. In this timely, penetrating, and highly readable book, Suzanne Mettler illuminates the hidden government benefits and subsidies that comprise our ‘submerged state’ and demonstrates how its murky operation impairs democratic practice and weakens civic engagement.” • (Eric M. Patashnik, University of Virginia)

Suzanne Mettler is the Clinton Rossiter Professor of American Institutions at Cornell University. Her most recent book is *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation*.

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 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 its 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. This book is not perfect. Mettler is a liberal political scientist, and she has the biases of her profession: that conservatives are responsible for much of what's gone wrong with America over the past 30 years (disclosure: I agree), and that citizens would vote 'better' (i.e. for liberals) if they were just better informed. She is also not quite up to the task of sinking the submerged state. But these are minor quibbles. In the social sciences, I evaluate theories on their explanatory power, and Mettler has provided a powerful lens for seeing many divergent policies as part of a unitary whole. In a just and reasonable world, the 2012 Presidential campaign would be about Mettler's book. Unfortunately, we're still living on Earth, and so it's going to be about Obama's socialism and Romney's dog.

A must read

Excellent book, unveiling how hidden public goods and services are corrosive to our democracy.

Review for "The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine Democracy," Suzanne Mettler. I 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. The Submerged State is so inspiring for its fluidity and ability to cut straight to the core of the problem in U.S. governance today. America's citizens do not fully understand how their freedoms are being represented in Washington and across the country. Permeated throughout the book is the emphasis on behavioral economics - evidence-based policymaking, and how public policy influences the health of democracy. Are we really free in America if the average person in this country does not really understand, for example, the depth of influence on social policy by "private actors" who stand to benefit the most? Most of us vote with a herd mindset without the foggiest idea of who is driving the bus...merely passengers. The book is a must-read. It will turn on the light that will enable most of us to begin to join the conversation that govern our lives and that of future generations.

Despite their growing size, scope, and tendency to channel government benefits toward the wealthy, the policies of the submerged state remain largely invisible to ordinary Americans: indeed, their hallmark is the way they obscure government's role from the view of the general public, including those who number among their beneficiaries. The submerged state lies beneath the surface, unseen. It is difficult to find a few words to convey Mettler's message; you need to read the entire book to understand how the Republican Party and big money controls the public image of the Obama presidency. Suzanne Mettler is the Clinton Rossiter Professor of American Institutions at Cornell University.

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