

## BOOKS &amp; ARTS

## Winning the arguments on Capitol Hill

**Harold Varmus** enjoys a guide to the inner workings of the US Congress by legislator Henry Waxman.

**The Waxman Report:  
How Congress Really Works**  
by Henry Waxman with Joshua Green  
Twelve: 2009. 256 pp. \$24.99

Most US scientists who are politically engaged on behalf of their profession have one objective: to enhance the budgets of their funding agencies. Their heroes are supportive advocates and congressional appropriators. But the rest of what Congress does may seem irrelevant, irrational or even mysterious.

In his first book, Henry Waxman — a Democrat, a member of the US House of Representatives since 1975, and one of the most accomplished legislators of our time — gives a useful corrective, focusing on policy and oversight, not just the money. *The Waxman Report* is a welcome guide for those who wish to learn more about the complex intersections of science and government, as the author describes his legislative fights against tobacco, HIV/AIDS and the use of steroids in sports; and his advocacy of food nutrition labelling, clean air and drugs for rare diseases.

Waxman represents the district that includes Hollywood, California, but he would not be called glamorous in appearance or style. He does, however, share other traits with his district's most famous industry — an aptitude for dramatic staging, an appetite for intriguing strategies and a recognition of star power. Some of his most stirring moments have come when using his hearing room as a stage to assemble powerful figures — from captains of industry to sports heroes — to expose deceptions that threaten public health or the environment. In this sense, he more closely resembles a morally driven film director than a committee chairman.

Waxman's legislative successes have often depended on understanding the importance of public support, shrewdly assessing how to get it, and effectively transmitting the message to key people. In 1994, he knew that Congress would not give the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) any regulatory authority over tobacco products. But he also knew that he could



Henry Waxman (below left) made tobacco executives testify in Congress in 1994 to sway public opinion.

move public opinion in the right direction by bringing the heads of tobacco companies to testify before Congress and then asking embarrassing questions. That famous hearing — and the iconic photograph of the mass swearing-in of chief executives — helped to build public support for the extended powers over tobacco products recently granted to the FDA by Congress.

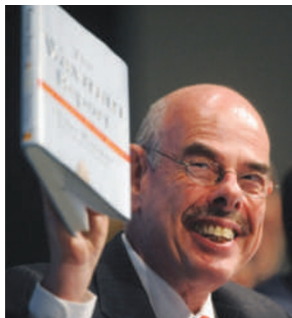
Some years earlier, when Waxman's bill to provide tax benefits for companies that made drugs for rare illnesses was threatened with a Senate defeat or a presidential veto, he asked friends in Hollywood to produce a television show that dramatized the problem, and asked others to lobby President Ronald Reagan at a holiday party. In this way, the Orphan Drug Act became law in 1983. He also praises Edward Kennedy's naming of one of the first major pieces of HIV/AIDS legislation in 1989 after Ryan White, a young patient with haemophilia who had been infected by a blood transfusion and who happened to live in a midwestern state represented by a senator whose vote was crucial. Even homophobic legislators were unlikely to oppose the Ryan White CARE Act.

Gimmicks, of course, do not work on their own. Waxman's successes have required a passion for progressive policy, patience, persistence

and a deep knowledge of his subjects — traits that are all too rarely displayed in Congress these days. Waxman preaches a seemingly naive optimism, noting that “no matter how gloomy the outlook or fearsome the opposition ... landmark legislation can be attained through organization, skill, and hard work”. In fact, his victories have often depended on savviness as well as on industry. As a proponent of compromise with his opponents, he writes of the virtue of being open to “unlikely alliances”. And as a tactician, he notes that whereas big issues generate noise, they often have little effect on ordinary people's lives. Smaller issues such as food labelling, he explains, may “fly under the radar, but ... have a revolutionary impact”.

Waxman is tough and pragmatic, as well as clever and idealistic. He defends his provision of campaign funds to fellow Democrats who might later support his bills, saying that it is “useful to think of money as a political fact of life”. He speaks frankly about his opponents' faults and about his own occasional missteps, such as the day he yielded to an unfortunate compromise on the labelling of dietary supplements. And he recounts how he has made use of procedural tactics to achieve his ends, such as bringing the legislative process on a colleague's weak ‘clean air’ measure to a near-standstill.

Despite differences in social background, Waxman has much in common with the late Edward Kennedy. Recently eulogized as perhaps the most effective senator of the modern era, Kennedy was heir to a familial political tradition, entering the Senate with ease at a young age despite little experience. By contrast,



**“Landmark legislation can be attained through organization, skill and hard work.”**  
— Henry Waxman

Waxman was raised by a struggling Jewish family working its way out of the Depression in Los Angeles. After fighting his way, with a few lucky breaks and a law degree, to the California State Assembly in 1968, he positioned himself in 1974 for a newly created seat in the House of Representatives and won a subcommittee chairmanship only five years later.

In their respective halls of Congress, Kennedy and Waxman became similarly known as masters of the legislative process, combining liberal political ideals with a willingness to work with opponents to get things done. During long

careers, both have produced remarkable legislative records in domains in which science is important, including health care and regulatory policy — yet without ever serving on those all-powerful appropriations committees. In this slim volume, we learn how Waxman did it. ■

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inside China was the founding in 1995 of the Tsinghua Bulletin Board System (BBS), which was started by students at the computer-science department of Tsinghua University, where I was an undergraduate. Even today, with the prevalence of text messaging, blogs, YouTube and Twitter, the BBS continues to be a widely used online platform in China, and its underlying technology has progressed from dial-up connections to broadband networks.

Although filled with vivid anecdotes, this book is an academic publication. Its storytelling is punctuated by jargon and scholarly narratives, including numerous academic references. Nonetheless, it is a valuable information resource. Yang's analysis covers a broad canvas and includes many statistics. The investigation into the business side of online activism will particularly fascinate many readers. Online viewings surely translate into money, and manufactured online contention generates lots of viewings. Some businesses, including art dealers, present items as 'banned in China' to promote their wares. Also a reality are competitive tactics, such as the '50 cents party' — people who are paid 50 cents an item for posting prescribed messages at online forums.

Governmental control of content is the elephant in the room. The mechanisms for restricting content flow into China and for controlling domestic Internet content — down to a single book entry on Amazon, for example — have become sophisticated in recent years. This is aided by the fact that only a few state-owned access points connect the domestic Internet to the outside world. Chinese 'netizens' counter these constraints with ingenuity, such as using Internet proxies to bypass state firewalls, or posting opinions in unrelated forums to postpone detection. The Chinese habit of reposting — in which a user copies an article in its entirety to a new forum, rather than linking to the original posting — makes the job of eradicating an erratic blog much harder.

Sixteen years ago this month, media magnate Rupert Murdoch declared that "advances in the technology of telecommunications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere." Last year, China overtook the United States as the country with the largest online population. In the time between, Yang's book documents how China's netizens have stumbled on online activism as a response to, among other things, a flawed justice system. Time will tell whether the revolution in communication technologies will lead to a new cultural or social revolution. ■

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## China's unofficial democracy

### The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online

by Guobin Yang

Columbia University Press: 2009. 320 pp. \$29.50, £20.50

In July this year, a 20-year-old university student in the southern Chinese city of Hangzhou was sentenced to three years in prison for driving recklessly and killing a pedestrian. This would have been a sad but unremarkable case, except that it was only brought following a huge national outcry. Reports that local police initially protected the student, whose family was well connected, were spread over the Internet and eventually forced the police to respond.

Similar examples of online citizen activism occur every day. *The Power of the Internet in China* analyses how the Internet's rapid development in China has given its citizens a mechanism to air and share individual opinions that may differ from official positions, to connect and organize often against the will of the authorities, and to improve their own lives directly and visibly. The Internet allows Chinese citizens to practise, as cultural critic Raymond Williams termed it, "unofficial democracy".

In researching the book, Guobin Yang, a professor at Columbia University who grew up in China, read Chinese material first-hand, observed and participated in online forums and interacted with Chinese citizens online. The book's 70 case studies range from patients with diabetes or hepatitis B fighting against governmental employment discrimination, to Internet-organized worldwide demonstrations in response to the 1998 Indonesian atrocities towards the local ethnic Chinese population, to massive online and offline protests over news reporting by Western media in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Yang's recounting of notable events along the historical path to China's online activism brought back old memories of my own. The first electronic gathering place targeted at people interested in China — the USENET newsgroup soc.culture.china — was started soon after I left Beijing for Cambridge, UK, in late 1987. I quickly became an active participant, devoting entire mornings to reading and replying to postings. As a student, I helped edit *China News Digest*, the first China-themed English-language electronic newsletter, which was published free by e-mail.

The milestone event for the citizens' Internet



China's online community has found its own voice.