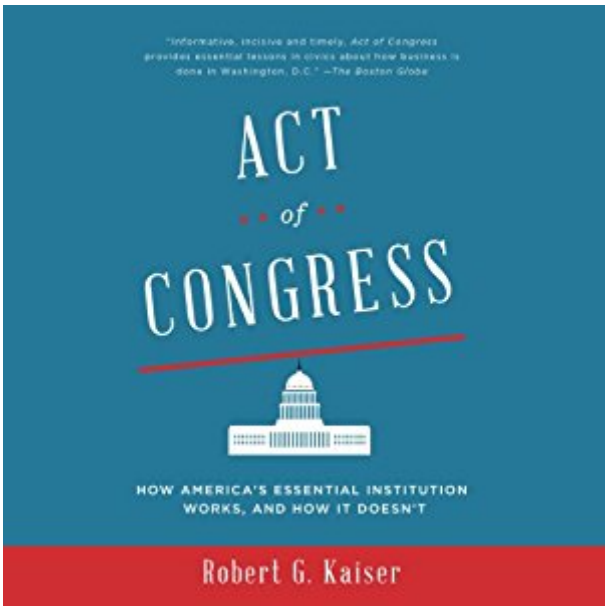
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Act Of Congress: How America's Essential Institution Works, And How It Doesn't



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Synopsis

An eye-opening account of how Congress today really works - and doesn’t - that follows the dramatic journey of the sweeping financial reform bill enacted in response to the Great Crash of 2008. The founding fathers expected Congress to be the most important branch of government and gave it the most power. When Congress is broken - as its justifiably dismal approval ratings suggest - so is our democracy. Here, Robert G. Kaiser, whose long and distinguished career at The Washington Post has made him as keen and knowledgeable an observer of Congress as we have, takes us behind the sound bites to expose the protocols, players, and politics of the House and Senate - revealing both the triumphs of the system and (more often) its fundamental flaws. Act of Congress tells the story of the Dodd-Frank Act, named for the two men who made it possible: Congressman Barney Frank, brilliant and sometimes abrasive, who mastered the details of financial reform, and Senator Chris Dodd, who worked patiently for months to fulfill his vision of a Senate that could still work on a bipartisan basis. Both Frank and Dodd collaborated with Kaiser throughout their legislative efforts and allowed their staffs to share every step of the drafting and deal making that produced the 1,500-page law that transformed America’s financial sector. Kaiser explains how lobbying affects a bill - or fails to. We follow staff members more influential than most senators and congressmen. We see how Congress members protect their own turf, often without regard for what might best serve the country - more eager to court television cameras than legislate on complicated issues about which many of them remain ignorant. Kaiser shows how ferocious partisanship regularly overwhelms all other considerations, though occasionally individual integrity prevails. Act of Congress, as entertaining as it is enlightening, is an indispensable guide to a vital piece of our political system desperately in need of reform.

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Customer Reviews

I have been studying the substance of the Dodd Frank act elsewhere (see Regulating Wall Street by Acharya, et al., a nice solid introduction). I teach law but had not walked through a recent end-to-end blow-by-blow of the "sausage-making" of federal legislation. I guess I wanted more legal substance here, in terms of who wrote what and why, but (though some fair amount of that is here) this is quintessentially not about the financial/theoretical complexities (vis a vis legislating) so much as it is (as advertised) a book at the Congress member-to-member and house-to-house level, and gives a cogent view of that world, and how things get done. So, it did fulfill my expectations. I wouldn’t call it great storytelling, but it has a workmanlike tone, detail and pace of events. This is a good opportunity to express my admiration and gratitude for the staffers who do so much work. As with many businesses, we tend to mostly see the figureheads, but the importance of the staffers (who are, in Congress, undercompensated by any measure of the modern financial world they are affecting) is on display here. Also, we get to see some congress members’ personalities as waffling around, making friendly assurances and then being nudged in other directions by key staffers, with their message wandering around. There are many different levels of intelligence and ability on display here.

Long-time Washington reporter Kaiser has reported a dismal story of dysfunctional Congress, rife with partisan aggression, filled with campaign-fund raisers, empty of policy makers and virtual blank slates regarding the laws it passes. Any informed citizen is vaguely aware of this, but Kaiser’s detailed reporting of the passage of the Dodd-Frank finance bill brings these problems together to show us what a true horror story Congress is right now. I would have preferred more focus on the substance of the legislation, and the book has a few earmarks of a newspaper reporter’s difficulty with sustained narrative, but these are quibbles. It’s a cliche, but true: every American citizen needs to know the ills of our legislative branch and how extraordinarily complex any solution is.

This author takes a particular situation and weaves into the story a real description of the workings of Congress. A lot of it I knew, but this author tells it like it is. For many readers it will be shocking.

For cynics who think it is even worse, they will be disappointed in this. But if things are to get done in politics, a perfectionist is not being realistic. Deals have to be made. Factions need to be catered to. To get things done pragmatists are required. Barney Frank, about whom most of this book is about, was a pragmatist. Idealists, who won't compromise, have no business in Congress. This book shows how a pragmatist got something done. What was done is not perfect, but is a good deal better than nothing.

Kaiser uses the Dodd-Frank financial reform bill as a mechanism to illustrate what really goes on in congress today. Had he been given equivalent access to the players in the Healthcare bill, he could have told the same story using that bill. The book is written as a blow by blow account of Rep Frank's effort to negotiate a bill and then it shifts to a similar account of Sen. Dodd's efforts. The author provides inside details of much of the dynamics between various committee's and theirs staffs - at times it is almost like a "gossip tell all" story - it is very entertaining and a very fast read. The book also includes a number of photographs of many of the players which helps the reader to visualize the story as it unfolds.Of particular interest is Rep. Frank and Sen. Dodd's opinion of their colleague's. Kaiser's description of Rep. Maxine Waters was worth the price of the book!As to the overall message of the book, it is one of despair. It would appear that our elected officials now make all legislative decisions based on 1) how to optimize lobbyist dollars, 2) how to gain maximum political advantage, 3) how does this affect the next election. The question of what is best for the country and constituents is rarely a significant factor.Overall, a fascinating story that unfortunately does not inspire hope in our future.

What a great read! Such a humanized view of the political process! See the truth about what goes on in the U.S. House, Senate and Executive branches of govenment during the enactment of a bill. Do it while being entertained, angered, appauled and exhausted by the perserverance of the politicians who managed the Dodd Frank Bill through to completion. Be left wondering how, in the future, Republicans and Democratic Senators and Congressmen can escape from the dictators who are in control of each party. What can be done to free those same patriots so they will be able to do what they know is right for the country. Puzzle over ways the nefarious behaviours of Frank Luntz and Newt Gingrich and how they can be neutralized. Mr. Kaiser did a splendid job of creating a work that will surely become a classic. This is a must read for all AmericansDavisdr

I'm a teacher and always looking for books that discuss the lawmaking process in interesting ways.

Most books on the sausage-making aspects of lawmaking are very boring, but this one is great. The topic isn't one that all students can embrace easily, but the level of detail gives me a ton of options for discussion points. I'll use it to discuss private versus public statements of lawmakers, grand-standing and credit-claiming, and how the committee system works.

Bought this for a school project and final paper. A very interesting book and take on the relationship between Congressmen/ Senators and their staffs. A good read for someone who is interested in learning about the legislative process... a deep insight to the Dodd-Frank.

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