



Democratic Beginnings: Founding in Western State

Amy Bridges

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State constitutions are blueprints for government institutions, declarations of collective identity, statements of principle, values, and goals. It naturally follows, and this book demonstrates, that the founding documents and the conventions that produced them reflect the emerging dynamics of American democracy in the nineteenth century. Nowhere is this more clear, Amy Bridges tells us in *Democratic Beginnings*, than in the American West.

A close study of the constitutional conventions that founded eleven Western states, and of the constitutions they wrote, *Democratic Beginnings* traces the arc of Western development. Spanning the sixty years from California's constitution of 1850 to those of Arizona and New Mexico in 1910—and including Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming—Bridges shows how delegates to these states' constitutional conventions, pragmatically and creatively devised law and policy for the unprecedented challenges they faced. Far from the "island communities" of conventional 19th-century American history, these delegates, and the territories they represented, were thoroughly engaged in the central issues of their times, at the local, regional, and national levels—mining and agriculture, labor law and corporate responsibilities, water rights and government obligations, education and judicial practice.

Theirs was not the Founders' constitutional convention. With very different tasks, delegates more representative of the population, and the experience of living in a democratic republic that their forebears lacked, the Western delegates found unparalleled opportunities at the conventions for popular input into law and public policy. What they did with these opportunities, and how these in turn shaped the emerging American West, is the story *Democratic Beginnings* tells.

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