District 8 took a beating during the anticommunist offensive of that decade, and collapsed completely by 1955, despite the strength of its radical unionism. Nevertheless, District 8 is an important topic, Feurer concludes, because of its considerable difference from mainstream unions: its commitment to civil rights, its adherence to community-based organizing strategies, and its penchant for eschewing collective bargaining and cooperation with employers in favor of shop floor militancy. Although it disappeared—along with the rest of radical American labor—its effort represents an important moment in labor history when union activism and community organizing were fused by ordinary people who wanted to participate in the decisions that shaped their lives. Feurer narrates that moment—and captures its spirit—very well.


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**Politician Extraordinaire**

*The Tempestuous Life and Times of Martin L. Davey*

By Frank P. Vazzano

(Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2008, Pp. xi, 322. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $45.00.)

Frank Vazzano argues in this straightforward, accessible, and competent biography that Martin L. Davey, Ohio congressman (1919-1921 and 1923-1929) and governor (1935-1939), gave “friend and foe alike the political ride of their lives” (p. 274). But the portrait Vazzano draws of the conservative politician suggests that the ride was mostly downhill.

Vazzano begins his survey of Davey’s life with a look at his troubled boyhood. His father, English immigrant John Davey, was a distant and stern figure who invented the art of tree surgery, but the resulting family fortune came too late to spare Martin from the typical trials of an impoverished turn-of-the-century American household. Indeed, much about Davey’s life was typical. Later, as mayor of Kent, Ohio, he was a booster of the usual sort; as a congressman, his combination of strong partisanship, populist instincts, and pro-business views relegated him to the sidelines; and as governor, he cared more about reelection than governing.

As the book’s title suggests, Davey was a better office-seeker than officeholder. While a congressman, he preferred to skip votes and legislative work to spend time with his family—and business—back in Ohio. True, being a member of the mini-
ty party limited his scope of action, but it is telling that his lone notable legislative success—securing funds for the construction of the Navy dirigible Akron (duly named after the city in Davey’s congressional district)—ended in the 1933 loss of the blimp and 73 men at sea. Davey’s time as governor is equally devoid of general interest. The only really noteworthy event of his time in Columbus was a tiff with presidential adviser Harry Hopkins over the organization of New Deal relief efforts, which Vazzano treats in detail. More important to Davey and more interesting to the contemporary reader, however, were the methods that Governor Davey used to keep his political machine well lubricated with both private and public money. Only vetted Democrats could realistically hope to hold a government job, and Davey, with his henchman Francis Poulson, assessed as much as 5 percent of state employees’ salaries for their campaign coffers. There were also, of course, the usual side payments and kickbacks associated with government purchasing and the distribution of liquor licenses and similar privileges.

In his conclusion, the sympathetic Vazzano excuses Davey’s consistently petulant responses to his critics, his unprincipled refusal to condemn the 1920s Klan, and his use of public powers for private gain with the tepid admission that the governor was “a bit of a scoundrel” (p. 274). Scoundrel, though, is the wrong word. There was nothing charming or dashing about the mature Davey, as there was about, say, Huey Long. Davey simply viewed patronage and payouts as tools in the vote-winning game, not as ways to advance the interests of the public at large or even of one class of the public.

Accordingly, Vazzano’s life of Davey, like William Pickett’s 1990 biography of Homer Capehart, is a useful study of a fairly ordinary working politician in twentieth-century America. Davey’s story may not be inspiring, but that is unsurprising; most political careers are not. Examining the circumstances and responses of everyday politicians is a useful way to understand politics, and incidentally a useful corrective to both romanticized and demonized conceptions of the political vocation. An exclusive focus on the Roosevelts, Lincolns, and Kennedys tends to distort those realities and to overshadow the experiences of vast majority of men and women in public life. After all, to paraphrase Roman Hruska, the mediocre politicians are entitled to a little attention, aren’t they?

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