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Policy History Without Historians

Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Pp. xiii, 298. \$47.50).

Martin J. Smith, *Pressure, Power, and Policy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993. Pp. ix, 262. \$59.95).

Historical interest among social scientists, rejected as unscientific during the behaviorist revolution of the 1960s, has been quickening during the past decade. In American political science, the tradition of historical and institutional analysis associated with scholars like V. O. Key Jr., kept alive during the 1960s and 1970s in party systems research, was revived in the 1980s under the banner of the "new institutionalism." In comparative politics, the Weberian tradition in political sociology was sustained during the postwar era in the work of such historical comparativists as Reinhard Bendix, Immanuel Wallerstein, Charles Tilly, and Theda Skocpol. The books by Baumgartner and Jones on American policy-making and by Martin Smith on U.S. and British policy-making demonstrate some of the ways history is used—and not used—in contemporary political research.

In *Agendas and Instability* Baumgartner and Jones, both professors of political science at Texas A&M University, challenge the notion that the American political system is inherently conservative, dominated by economic elites who exploit the complex institutions of separated powers and federalism to maintain policy control. This mistaken view is reinforced, the authors explain, by the tradition of short-term, single-issue research in political science, which has emphasized the advantages of "iron trian-

gles" or policy subsystems in a decentralized, fragmented environment. To test this proposition, they examine several policy issues over an extended period, usually the post-1945 era, but in some instances covering most of the twentieth century. Their prototypical issue is the development and control of nuclear power, where early in the postwar era a policy monopoly was created. Operating under the aegis of the Atomic Energy Commission, the nuclear industry accomplished a classic capture at the founding of the regulatory machinery. By the late 1960s, however, the nuclear monopoly faced escalating attacks by environmentalists and other opponents; by the mid-1970s the monopoly was broken and the AEC was destroyed. Other issues examined by the authors include pesticide and tobacco use, urban affairs policy, and drug, alcohol, and child abuse.

Baumgartner and Jones argue that the short-term, single-issue research on policy monopolies, for example, the classic iron-triangle studies of agriculture, forestry, public works, veterans affairs, federal science policy, or health care policy, overemphasizes the tenacity of elite dominance. Long-term analysis of agenda-setting, they contend, reveals a process of decay often followed by successful challenge and rapid change. Their more optimistic, democratic model thus seeks "to account both for long periods of stability and domination of important policy areas by privileged groups of elites, and for rapid change in political outcomes, where apparently entrenched economic interests find themselves on the losing side of the political battle" (3).

What drives this model, they ask, producing sharp bursts of change following long periods of apparent stability? In complex society, governments must assign most issues to *parallel* processing routines—that is, to policy subsystems run by experts. Only issues high on the public agenda can command *serial* processing, where governments concentrate attention on policy choice. Thus the key to maintaining policy monopoly by subsystem elites is public apathy. The pesticide and tobacco industries, for example, alertly formed alliances with USDA agency officials and agriculture committees in Congress and effectively excluded weak or inattentive outsider interests (public health officials, environmentalists, consumer advocates, congressional health committees). Denied the benefits of policy, outsider groups seek coalition allies and new points of access to penetrate the system and change policy. In a rapidly changing, pluralist society like the United States, policy monopolies thus tend to decay. In the case of the nuclear power, pesticide, and tobacco industries, changes in public attitudes associated with the environmental, health and safety, and consumer movements of the 1960s created a "window of opportunity" (in John Kingdon's phrase) that challenger groups used to win participa-

tion and force policy change. Insurgent groups forced government to switch from parallel processing, where experts serve elite interests within closed policy subsystems, to serial processing, where outgroup challengers mobilized to break the policy monopoly.

Baumgartner and Jones gain their long-term perspective by designing what social scientists call a longitudinal study. This involved assembling a time series of quantitative indicators, for example, coding the *New York Times Index* and the *Readers Guide* over several decades to identify the movement of issues on and off the public agenda and to identify positive and negative attitudes. To keep their longitudinal data pure, they also appear to have devised a bibliographic filter that screened out virtually all books and articles written by historians. In a bibliography of almost three hundred items, one recognizes the lonely figure of historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., whose *Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1986) receives perfunctory attention in the book's last few pages. Baumgartner and Jones have discovered a phenomenon—periodic bursts of policy reform following long periods of stability—that historians have been writing about for generations. Even if most political histories do not meet high standards of policy sophistication, there are many who do. For example, despite the primacy of nuclear power among the issues selected by Baumgartner and Jones, they ignored Brian Balogh's *Chain Reaction: Expert Debate and Public Participation in American Commercial Nuclear Power, 1945–1975* (Cambridge University Press, 1991). They concentrate on agricultural and housing policy but ignore the substantial literature contributed by historians. The *Journal of Policy History* itself has recently published special issues devoted to two of Baumgartner and Jones's policy areas: drug use and urban affairs policy. Both William O. Walker's issue on drug policy (1991) and Martin V. Melosi's issue on urban policy (1993) include bibliographies listing studies from many disciplines, but the historians they cite (including themselves) are invisible in *Agendas and Instability*.

Pressure, Power, and Policy, by Martin Smith, a lecturer in politics at the University of Sheffield, is similarly concerned with the relationship between interest groups and the state in policy-making. Like Baumgartner and Jones, Smith studies selected issue areas (agriculture, business regulation/industrial policy, health, trade, and consumer policy) and locates their policy-making dynamics along a spectrum that ranges from tightly integrated insider arrangements (iron triangles or sub-governments in the United States, policy communities or monopolies in Great Britain) to loosely clustered issue networks or advocacy coalitions. More than Baumgartner and Jones, Smith emphasizes the autonomy of

state actors. The state in his view has district interests and can act independently to determine policy outcomes by setting the rules that govern society. In most closed policy communities or subgovernments, such as health care in Great Britain and trade policy in the mid-century United States, policy monopolies are formed less because interest groups demand it than because government actors prefer it.

Like Baumgartner and Jones, Smith emphasizes the importance not only of structural factors (although neither book sufficiently acknowledges the contribution of James Q. Wilson's four-cell typology based on the distribution of costs and benefits) but also of change over time. To illustrate the decay of policy monopolies over time, both books cite American agriculture policy, which shifted from tight subsystem control in the 1940s and 1950s to more open issue network bargaining in the 1970s and 1980s. Smith, however, compares structural factors and change over time in two nations, Great Britain and the United States, where history has produced sharply differing political systems and cultures.

"Britain has an executive-dominated, unitary political system," Smith observes, where the "parliamentary system with strict party discipline results in the government dominating the political process" (8-9). Most policy decisions are made by the central government with only formal approval by the legislature. The British state is highly elitist and secretive, with access to central government controlled by a small number of ministers and civil servants. The United States, on the other hand, decentralized by federalism and fragmented by separation of powers, provides multiple access to interest groups. Political parties and party discipline in the United States are weak, as is the tradition of class politics. Although both nations are English-speaking, capitalist democracies, these different histories produce sharply differing policy consequences. In health policy, Great Britain has maintained a policy monopoly in a closed subsystem, while American policy is made within loosely integrated policy network—doctors, hospitals, insurance companies, the pharmaceutical industry, congressional committees, the Department of Health and Human Services, advocacy groups for consumers, the elderly, the poor. Similarly, in agricultural policy Britain has maintained a closed subsystem, while American policy has shifted since the 1960s toward a loose, commodity-based network featuring hard bargaining among associations for milk, sugar, wheat, rice, beef, and so forth.

Both books emphasize change over time, with pressure from excluded outsider groups operating to break down policy monopolies, especially in the pluralist United States. Smith's comparative study lacks the formal apparatus for assembling longitudinal data found in the Baumgartner and

Jones book. But throughout his book Smith emphasizes the historical context within which pressure groups and state actors operate. History, ideology, the organization of the policy process, past policies, and the long-term evolution of the policy area give some groups advantages over others. Like Baumgartner and Jones, however, Smith includes virtually no historians in a bibliography containing almost five hundred citations. Smith's book was written for a student audience, while Baumgartner and Jones write for their colleagues. Like most literature on public policy, these two studies are dense with abstractions and laced with social science jargon. Both begin with theoretical expositions, with Smith discussing the inadequacies of macro-level theory (Marxism, pluralism, post industrialism, even post-Fordism), while Baumgartner and Jones explain their model of "punctuated equilibrium" in terms typically free of the grand "isms." Both books are intelligently argued and repay a careful reading, although in the absence of narrative coherence, the reading is hard going.

Both books, in an attempt to develop a meso-level theory that will explain the policy-making process—punctuated equilibrium for Baumgartner and Jones, state autonomy in policy networks for Smith—take historical analysis seriously yet acknowledge only in passing an explanatory factor that has long anchored the work of historians. This is the old-fashioned phenomenon of reform eras, periodic eruptions of social and political upheaval often accompanied by reform movements and partisan realignment. Baumgartner and Jones describe a postwar era in which the familiar, cozy, iron-triangle routines of expanding subgovernments were sharply altered by the extraordinary transformations of the 1960s. In analyzing the devolution of policy monopolies dealing with nuclear power, pesticides, and tobacco, they capture some of the consequences of the social movements of the 1960s and the new social regulation they generated, including greater regulation of drug, alcohol, and child abuse. Their issue selection screened out, however, a major new area of subgovernment expansion: social regulation in the interest of newly organized, rights-based constituencies—African Americans, women, Latinos and other ethnic minorities, the elderly, and the physically and mentally disabled. Many traditional American subgovernments, virtually unchallenged prior to the 1960s, were fragmented into issue networks or even collapsed in the wake of the 1960s insurgency, as Baumgartner and Jones observe, but new policy monopolies were created to serve powerful new clienteles. This is consistent with their model for change. But in my view their model seriously undervalues the difficult-to-measure role of the rare sea change that swept American society and government during the 1960s.

Longitudinal studies can usefully record the fever chart of selected issues as policy-making develops over time. But social scientists by using them cannot reconstruct or explain the causes and consequences of unique seismic shifts in social and political life—like the convulsions of the 1960s, or the 1860s. Nor should they try. That complicated and imprecise task is the job of historians. In this pursuit, policy historians must include good social science studies like the two reviewed here in their homework. They would be better studies, however, if the social scientists would return the compliment.

Hugh Davis Graham is Holland N. McTyeire Professor of American History and Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. His recent publications include, as editor, *Civil Rights in the United States* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), and author of "The Stunted Career of Policy History: A Critique and an Agenda," *The Public Historian* 15 (Spring 1993): 15–37.