Book Review

The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems
Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner
University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, xii + 316pp.
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This book is a major contribution to the field of political science. It will make the language of our field change: from now on we will evaluate institutions in terms of friction and feedback mechanisms, agendas in terms of relative carrying capacities and policy change in terms of weak shoulders and fat tails. With *The Politics of Attention* Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner continue the standard setting work they initiated in *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (1993). Their innovative approach takes information processing as its core concept and presents analyses based on an impressive dataset of post-1945 US policy indicators.

The book addresses the following research question: Why do we observe long periods of stability and irregular strong shifts in policies? Under the assumption that the main function of a political system is to detect problems, prioritize them and develop policies to address them, we would expect political institutions to respond proportionally to social signals and adapt policies incrementally. However, as Jones and Baumgartner show us, this is not the full story. That is, figures of policy changes, for example of annual changes in budgets, do not show a normal distribution but a strong bias for the status quo and occasional disproportionate changes from the previous year — hence the 'fat tails' and the 'weak shoulders.'

The authors argue that this is the result of inefficient information processing. Following Herbert Simon, they assume that individuals have certain cognitive limitations which make them only boundedly rational, and as a consequence they are expected to process information sequentially. This leads to adaptations in behavior that is leptokurtic or non-normally distributed. Institutions should help to overcome this problem by processing information in a parallel way with specialized administrative departments and divisions in the political system. However, as is discussed in this book, institutions have their own 'inefficiencies' that lead them to ignore or overreact to feedback cues and signals. So, it is the nature of both human decision making and the structure of the institutions as well as the interactions between these two that is claimed to explain the non-incremental distribution of policy changes.

We may observe varying manifestations of these information inefficiencies or thresholds for information intrusion at different stages of decision making.

As an example, when a policy issue rises on the agenda it requires elites or organizational leaders to allocate scarce attention to that specific issue. They have to process a new issue in a sequential way and cannot benefit from the parallel information processing capacities of organizations that are allocated to existing policies. Or, as a second example, following Kingdon, organizations tend to present 'their' own specific solution to types of policy problems or, in the words of Simon, 'identify with the means,' and thus reduce the solution space for a certain problem. As the authors state: 'It takes a lot to overcome the cognitive and organizational frictions that encourage replication of the status quo' (p. 48). Further, inefficiencies in organizational feedback mechanisms may also create a 'cascade' through the network of interactions in the policy process or it may lead decision makers to 'sieve' information with ever greater constraints, both leading to *greater* change or jumps in policies when they occur. While these processes are neither new nor unknown, they are brought together in a coherent way in this study in order to empirically measure the extent of institutional friction.

This is where the 'Policy Agendas' dataset ⟨ http://www.policyagendas.org/ ⟩ comes in, which consists of indicators of attention to 20 categories of issues of several institutional sources. In Chapter 7, it is hypothesized that certain institutions or agendas show more cognitive or institutional friction and thus exhibit more kurtosis in their distribution of changes. For example, the media agenda (measured by annual change in the number of *NY Times* stories in a content category), is expected to show some punctuations but not as many as more institutionally embedded data series — such as budget data. This expectation is based on the low cognitive costs of shifting journalistic attention and the high institutional cost of changing budget allocations. More generally, the distributions show a stronger center and stronger tails along the four categories of data under study: policy input (elections, news), agenda setting (hearings, bills), decision making (orders, statutes) and budgets.

Why should we care? In Chapter 10, the authors test whether institutional activity follows from public wishes, that is, whether they consider the same issues important. Here, they find 'impressive congruence' between agendas (of Congress), policies (lawmaking) and public opinion polls. However, the so-called issue structure is found to be different: 'The public "lumps" its evaluation of the nation's most important problems into a small number of categories. Congress "splits" issues out, handling multiple issues simultaneously' (p. 269). Thus, the public and institutional agendas differ in their capacities to 'carry' multiple issues simultaneously. Is this a problem for the quality of political representation? Taking an instrumental view on representation, the authors conclude that it is not a problem. The American political system is a successful 'problem-detection and prioritization device' and a policy error-correction system.

With this analysis the authors bring together and build upon several important research traditions in political science. These include, according to the authors (p. 278), the idea of conflict expansion of Schattschneider, agenda setting as exposed by Cobb and Elder, the public policy focus of Kingdon and their own work on policy punctuations. This makes the book a must read for every political scientist and an example to follow across different countries. Nevertheless, some criticism is still in order. Among the things that would strengthen the argument are more formal tests of the causal mechanisms, a more explicit or a more normative theory, and some discussion of actors' preferences and interests.

First, the data and the theoretical interests of the authors allow for a broad exploration of statistical techniques to test causal effects. With their focus on distributional analysis, their study is unnecessarily ambiguous about the strength of specific causal effects and the relative importance of certain mechanisms. Why not, for example, test in a regression model the extent to which changes in public opinion explain changes in lawmaking? Or, why not trace the processes that have led to certain punctuations in a specific sector? The authors leave that to others and point to the advantages of using stochastic processes and distributional analysis. These enable them to reveal 'important insights about the processes that affect all policies across the entire government' (p. 282) — a claim that some may find a too general. Further, this approach requires massive amounts of data. And more problematically, these data need to be structured with extreme care and rigor. Perhaps more rigor than reality allows (e.g. what about changing budget categories? Slowly changing language or differences across countries?). This may be more important because contrary to regression analysis, coding mistakes, systematic errors and outliers do not fall away under the error term but become central in the analysis (which also has its obvious advantages). Regression methods would make it easier to include contextual processes and point to more specific causes of policy changes or stability.

This leads to a second criticism; this study is focused on macro-processes (built on micro-level assumptions) that are so generally formulated that they hardly can be wrong and thus hardly teach us anything. That is, we know now that some agendas, institutional venues or markets behave with a certain friction; but how much should we expect? And what causes these — cognitive or institutional phenomena or measurement errors? And how much is too much friction? The authors may not be too bothered with these points as they would see these as opportunities for other researchers. The main advantage of employing such a general theory is that it is applicable to diverse policy areas, long periods of time and — potentially — to different political systems.

However, on the question of the amount of friction that is 'acceptable' within a certain venue or agenda, the authors could have been more specific.

That is, the 'carrying capacities' between agendas may not be the same or agendas may not be working synchronously. When does this become a problem? When does institutional friction become irresponsible non-responsiveness or outright bias? Or, when are institutions too sensitive to informational feedbacks and allow cascades of change too frequently? Also, or perhaps especially, when one takes an instrumental view on representation, there should be some indication of institutional failure or success.

Finally, the study is weak on actors and their preferences. The authors could have incorporated actors in their model, for instance by speculating about the effects of interest groups on policy processes. This might lead to an increase of friction (when these groups behave as veto players) or it could lead to a decrease of friction when these groups improve feedback mechanisms. However, even then some scholars will not be satisfied because the model focuses primarily on institutions and issues — not actors.

In sum, this book should be read and used in public policy classes, because it provides a basis for further research and debate. In this book, we find a convincing argument to improve incremental models of policy change, an intelligent look on the workings of public institutions, and an innovative approach to map government activity across time. Despite some criticisms, this is clearly an example to follow.

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