Book Review

Seek and Ye Shall Find: What Role Should Information Play in Governance?

Baumgartner, F.R. & Jones, B.D. (2015). *The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 978-0-226-19812-5 (231 pp., $27.50).

This book begins with a simple premise: the more we look for problems, the more likely we are to find them. But what happens if we deliberately decide not to spend as much time and money on the search process? It's a dilemma that applies to so many domains of our lives. Atul Gawande, for example, recently published an article in the May 11, 2015 edition of *The New Yorker* entitled "America's Epidemic of Unnecessary Care," in which he explores how this dilemma plays out in the medical world, arguing that in America we err on the side of collecting more information than is necessary to make careful medical decisions. The realm of focus for the well-respected political scientists Baumgartner and Jones is American governance. Information is at the heart of politics, they argue, and how that information is gathered, processed, and controlled is integral to an understanding of how the political process works.

Baumgartner and Jones set their analysis within the second half of the twentieth century, when there was great growth in American government, followed by rapid consolidation. The period of burgeoning growth began in the 1950s, fueled by a post-World War II sense of optimism about the ability of government to solve problems. By the late 1970s, conservatives had mounted an attack on big government that targeted information. Data collection, social science, and policy analysis were considered problematic because they led to more government programs. In keeping with the predominant anti-government perspective, there was a sharp decline in the number of issues addressed by Congress between the late 1970s through the mid-2000s (the end of Baumgartner and Jones's period of analysis). Although fewer public policy issues were raised and addressed during this timeframe, Baumgartner and Jones provide a convincing and nuanced argument for how government continued to grow. Providing empirical insights

as well as theoretical contributions, the book will appeal to a broad range of academics and practitioners, including social and political scientists and policy makers—especially those who are historically minded.

Part One of the book is comprised of three chapters that explore how government prioritizes and responds to complex problems. There is a difference, Baumgartner and Jones argue, between routine administrative "engineering" problems, such as providing clear drinking water, and complex problems, such as eliminating poverty. Although engineering problems call for clarity of authority and concise discussion, when it comes to complex problems, too much "clarity" can suggest that not enough information has been generated. Therefore, when we are trying to set priorities and determine the best way to address complex problems, we should welcome diversity of information. Experts, who are invaluable in the case of engineering problems, are less effective at addressing more complex problems because they are often too influenced by their prior experience and training to take an unbiased view of the available information. In this way, experts operate like the rest of us typically do—seeking out information that bolsters our own point of view. Comfort with ambiguity is key; when it comes to addressing difficult nonengineering problems, decision makers need to resist the urge to shut down information-gathering mechanisms, and seek as much information as possible. That said, there is a point of no return—when so much effort is invested in problem exploration that no problems are solved. Perhaps those of us in the academic world can put this in the context of when it is finally time to stop reading and researching, and begin writing, or the manuscript will never materialize.

In Part Two, Baumgartner and Jones turn to an empirical exploration of their ideas using archival data collected through their own Policy Agendas Project. This largest section of the book, five chapters, charts the "Great New-Issue Expansion" that took place from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s, when there was a torrent of legislative activity in the United States. Through the Policy Agendas Project, Baumgartner and Jones have tracked the U.S. House and Senate committees from 1947 to 2006. An "entropy score" captures whether a committee's activity has been highly concentrated around a few topics (e.g., Natural Resources), or has met to discuss a wide range of subjects (e.g., Appropriations). Their detailed and thoughtful analyses show that by the 1970s, the committee system had undergone a transformation in terms of breadth of public policies addressed, and jurisdictional overlap. This transformation, they argue, fundamentally altered the pattern of conflict between Democrats and Republicans and created a spawning ground for the partisan polarization that is so notable today in 2015.

In discussing the broadening and thickening of American government, Baumgartner and Jones detail factors such as the growth of clandestine intelligence, the creation of new administrative agencies, the explosion of executive-level managers, the responsibility of Congress to provide oversight of new entities and programs, among others. They also focus on the role that information has played

in this process. At the same time that our government is larger, more diverse, and richer in information than it was in 1950, it is also confusing, more complex, and frustrating. From Homeland Security to health care, from defense to energy, since the middle of the twentieth century, the number of programs has mushroomed. Interestingly, they found no evidence to support the hypothesis that government grows when one political philosophy or platform triumphs. Government grows, they argue, when problems are recognized and addressed.

In the final two chapters of *The Politics of Information*, which make up Part Three, Baumgartner and Jones firmly support an abundance of information, even though it leads to a more unwieldy, overlapping, and potentially frustrating form of government. Yes, it is easier to make decisions when the flow of information is restricted to fewer rather than more plentiful and diverse sources. When it comes to engineering problems, experts can limit the information flow and make critical and timely decisions. When it comes to complex public policy issues, we should not limit the flow of information, or important problems might be misunderstood or overlooked. Contemporary government is more inefficient and bound to overreact or underreact to certain public policy signals. But this is a trade-off we must be willing to accept in favor of information richness.

— Phyllis Wentworth

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