



## The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Baumgartner, Frank R., and Bryan D. Jones. *The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 264 pages. \$85.00 (hardcover); \$27.50 (softcover).

In *The Politics of Information*, Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones develop a compelling argument that puts information at the center of political battles and struggles. The authors launch their enterprise by asserting that information is essential to the most important task in government: detecting and understanding problems. Increased information production enables citizens and elites to better detect and define problems, especially complex ones, which in turn makes it imperative to do something about them. As a result, programs are created and government grows.

The central question addressed by Professor Baumgartner and Professor Jones is an important one: Are institutions organized to emphasize diverse search and complexity, or are they organized to emphasize expertise and control? In other words, does it matter how governments search and process information? The authors have a clear answer: Yes, it does. We learn that policy outcomes are superior when institutions are designed to incorporate multiple considerations and dimensions of a problem.

The fascinating key point in their argument is how the type of search process determines the level of policy-making activity. The government expands into new issues if the information search process is intense: Problems are created and take on real dimension when governments have the benefit of an informational political structure that is diverse, decentralized, and with overlapping jurisdictions. When policy action is initiated, the policy agenda expands, creating a larger and more intrusive government. Social science, planning, social analysis, and data collection all lead to detecting and understanding more problems.

In this book, the authors show that we know too little about how political leaders start interpreting a societal condition as a problem. One of the most impressive features of the book is demonstrating how the development of the information search process in the United States is deeply connected with the expansion and broadening of government activity. Utilizing data from the Policy Agenda Project, the authors analyze a great number of behaviors and trends since 1945. These provide the best evidence to date about the over-time dynamics of the information component of the agenda by analyzing, for

example, the number of hearings on subtopics across time, actual laws, and Supreme Court cases. Strikingly, the search and processing of information through mechanisms such as congressional committees and subcommittees with overlapping jurisdictions is a critical driver of agenda expansion. The data strongly show that legislation only comes later, when agencies are created to implement programs and continue to monitor the area.

A more general lesson to draw from the theory and the data analyses is that preferences do not explain policy choices. Neither divided government nor degree of polarization affect the aggressiveness of information search. We learn not only that government growth between the 1950s and the late 1970s is not a consequence of preferences of elected officials or the electorate, but also that ideological differences between parties are not enough to explain the broadening of government structure. Furthermore, the authors show how interest groups developed as a response to the broadening of the government agenda. In all, Professor Baumgartner and Professor Jones effectively prove that the search for information leads policy making.

However, just as we get excited about the government's search structure developments until the late 1970s, the book is doubtful about developments since then. The authors remarkably point out that the increase in government expansion produced a conservative reaction that limited the analytic capacity of government. The "expansion into new issues" phase stopped by the end of the 1970s, and in its place, a period of consolidation began. The major change was in Congress' main activity: from legislating to overseeing the myriad agencies and institutions it created during the broadening period.

Why this change at this precise moment? In a thought-provoking analysis, the authors point to the Reagan presidency as the first one to distrust information search and to challenge the bipartisan commitment to analysis and program development. While shrinking the government search capacity (i.e., staff reduction in committees and agencies by about 40%), the Reagan administration also turned to outside think tanks as the main providers of information. Thus, the nature and search for information changed: think tanks generally have low internal diversity in terms of viewpoints and hence, can reduce and censor information. An interesting point that the authors make is to suggest that issue developments and the consequent policy-making expansion influenced the emergence of polarization. For example, polarization is more pronounced in those issues that broadened the scope of government.

The book ends with a pessimistic view of the contemporary capacity of government to detect and define problems. Even though information search increased in specific areas after 1995 (e.g., clandestine intelligence), the authors note that those search mechanisms also reflect a focused and controlled process of information acquisition. That is, there is a conscious attempt to suppress information and problem discussion by limiting the capacity of Congress and defunding policy analyses in agencies.

In addition to these contributions, there are two avenues open for scholars to build on this work. The first is to compare and understand the institutional structure of information in different countries around the world. How do different countries organize their institutions to search and process information? This question has implications for understanding government growth and policy outcomes. If a good government allows full airing of public issues (because of the diversity of information), and at the same time is able to distinguish between problems that are solvable and those that are best left alone, scholars can use these tools to understand distinctive development paths.

The second area for future work is to dig deeper into studying the development of the institutional capacity to acquire and process information. What are the necessary conditions for entropic information search? What are the politics behind it? What are the nature and characteristics of the political struggles in different countries that influenced the development of such capacity?

Overall, Professor Baumgartner and Professor Jones make a substantial contribution in *The Politics of Information* to the study of the information search and processes within government. This book represents an important milestone in our understanding of public policy by bringing to the fore a central premise: the search for information strongly relates to the implementation of solutions. The charge is on us to delve into the details of how these politics of information search and processing work in some specific policy domain or during certain periods.

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