

Book Reviews

The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America. Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$85 (cloth).

For more than two decades, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones have pursued an influential and broad-ranging project on the dynamics of the American policy agenda. The results of their joint labor—presented on their popular Web site, policy-agendas.org, and developed in a series of books, articles, and edited volumes—constitute one of the major strands of research on policymaking in the United States. As a measure of their impact, in 2001 they received the Aaron Wildavsky Award of the American Political Science Association—a prize established to honor works of “lasting impact on the field of public policy”—for their seminal 1993 book, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*.

Now comes their latest installment: *The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America*. It is a formidable achievement. Bringing together the findings of their long work on policy agendas with a fresh theoretical focus on information processing, they trace out a picture of American governance that looks little like the portraits painted by journalists—or, for that matter, by political scientists focused on elections, public opinion, and partisan polarization.

As in their previous writings, Baumgartner and Jones do not overclaim. The dynamics of policy agendas are complex and unpredictable, they contend—not because they fail to exhibit generalized processes, but because those processes are inherently difficult to forecast. In particular, to quote the phrase that defines their approach (even if it is borrowed from the natural sciences), agenda setting and policy development follow a pattern of “punctuated equilibrium,” long periods of stasis, followed by brief periods of rapid change. Although the forces behind these dynamics are regular—the sudden attention to a problem because of a dramatic event or discovery, the shift of authority from one institutional venue to another, the cascade of enthusiasm for action that follows changes in perceptions of social conditions—exactly when and how the agenda of policymaking suddenly shifts remains, in their view, too unpredictable to reliably forecast.

Unpredictable but not random, and the goal of *The Politics of Information* is to explicate and illustrate a basic underlying driver: the quest for knowledge. Less grandly put, Baumgartner and Jones cast governance as a problem of information: getting it (or restricting it), ensuring it is reliable (which sometimes means reliably consistent with one’s priors), and acting on it. Political institutions are seen through this lens, which focuses less on representation or partisanship or organized groups than on information processing. Congress, the presidency, the courts, regulatory agencies, and other policymaking bodies are ships afloat in a sea of complexity. Whether they stay afloat depends on their capacity to map the waters around them without sinking under the weight of accumulated knowledge.

This somewhat abstract perspective is made concrete by a central narrative arc, revealed by a wide range of agenda measures (congressional hearings, federal

budgetary subcategories, etc.): the broadening, then narrowing of the American policy agenda after World War II. The inflection point has a precise date according to these measures: 1978, before Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and well before the rise of congressional Republicans under Newt Gingrich in 1995. While seeing the late 1970s as a turning point is not original, Baumgartner and Jones present more evidence than ever before that the "great agenda expansion" of the 1960s and 1970s that ramped up federal policy activism slowed and then reversed in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (their data end in 2008).

To be sure, big government has not become small government. Indeed, they suggest that growth in the range and intensity of federal policy activities—what they call the "broadening" and "thickening" of government—is mostly a one-way ratchet. But the post-1978 turn has compressed the agenda of national policy priorities and limited new ventures, even as the world around government has become more complex and the number of interest groups trying to shape policy has exploded.

More innovative still, Baumgartner argues that this compression was the result of deliberate institutional change—namely, the cutting back of the analytic capacities of the executive branch and Congress, mostly but not exclusively by Republican officeholders. This side of the story is familiar to those who have studied the legislative branch: The declining capacity of the Congressional Research Service and General Accounting Office and 1995 canning of the Office of Technology Assessment, as well as the steep cuts in congressional staff (particularly on specialized committees), are now widely understood to be major reasons for the growing influence of lobbyists on Capitol Hill. But Baumgartner and Jones put these changes (and similar ones on the other side of Pennsylvania Avenue) in a new context. If you are against government growing bigger, a pretty effective response turns out to be making it dumber. What you do not know cannot hurt you—or at least will not spur you to pursue new policy ventures.

This last point raises a sticky problem with Baumgartner and Jones's account. They are consistent in pushing to the side partisan politics, interest groups, public opinion, and elections (except a few big "mandate" moments, like 1964). And they do a good job of rebutting simple narratives of contestation between the parties. Unified and divided government, for example, do not look all that different. But their central narrative arc looks like a long, slow-moving transformation driven by a fundamental reshaping of the partisan, electoral, interest group, and opinion environments. What drove this change, a change so consequential for our politics and for so many Americans?

On this question, Baumgartner and Jones have surprisingly little to say. They demonstrate, as noted, that the analytic capacities of government tracked this transformation. Yet that merely pushes the question back: Where did the pressure for changing government capacities come from? At times, their story seems like one of ideas, as in the rise of deregulation, led by liberal stalwart Ted Kennedy. At others, it seems much more partisan, as in Gingrich's evisceration of congressional expertise or Reagan's know-less approach to executive leadership. At still others, it seems more interest driven. (In a telling graph, they show that the interest group explosion of recent decades was propelled by, rather than propelled, the broadening and thickening of government. Could the opposite now be true: the rise of outside pressure weakening inside capacity?).

In the end, I suspect that information processing is not the correct way to understand American governance, though information processing is certainly central to

American governance. As a new angle into the remarkable transformation that Baumgartner and Jones's remarkable project has revealed, it illuminates a side of political life too often neglected by pundits and analysts alike. But it is certainly not the last word on agenda setting and policy development in American politics—not even, I expect, from Baumgartner and Jones.

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Pursuing Horizontal Management: The Politics of Public Sector Coordination. B. Guy Peters. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 216 pp. \$50 (cloth).

This monograph examines coordination, an issue encountered every day among societal and political actors. More specifically, Guy Peters focuses in his book on how governments deal with issues pertaining to specialization and coordination. While the concentration of expertise in specialized organizations is necessary to facilitate high-quality public policies, the fragmentation of government into such organizations can complicate service delivery. Coordination appears to be the obvious solution to fragmentation, but empirically, we know of only a few success stories. Worse, coordination is complicated further by the involvement of nonstate actors, and processes of decentralization and disaggregation of polities. The how and why of segmented governance is the starting point of Peters' analysis, in which he attempts to "expand the understanding of the causes and remedies for the coordination problem" (p. 25).

In the introductory chapter of this book, Peters first defines coordination, explains why it is both of analytical and practical relevance, illustrates different dimensions of coordination, and then further discusses the methodological approach to assessing it empirically. Chapter 2 focuses more explicitly on the different types of barriers to coordination. Chapter 3 then is interested in understanding coordination. To this end, the author draws on four mechanisms: hierarchy, markets, networks, and collaboration. While the first three mechanisms are well known to governance scholars, the fourth—collaboration—can be regarded as a refinement or modification of network governance, as it builds on the attitudes of participants in the coordination process. In chapter 4, these four approaches are brought together with sets of instruments of coordination. As Peters explains, selecting among these instruments represents the outcome of a political process (p. 102). To better understand this rationale, insights from four case studies are provided. Chapter 5 begins with a case study on the creation and maintenance of the Department of Homeland Security in the United States, and then moves on to present measures to protect children from abuse and exploitation, policy programs in Finland, and finally the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the European Union. The cases examined in depth differ with regard to the instruments used and the success of coordination, but are alike in that coordination has stimulated learning processes and that hybrid approaches were chosen. The closing chapter qualifies the role of coordination in bureaucratic performance in addition to summing up the book's main points.

Peters succeeds in fleshing out his main thesis: that coordination is essential, but difficult to achieve. But his book has even more to offer: First, it moves away from structure-based approaches to public sector coordination and governance by introducing the concept of collaboration, which takes into account the attitudes of the