
Review Article

The politics of information: Problem definition and the course of public policy in America

Baumgartner, Frank R. and Bryan D. Jones, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015, 264 pp., \$27.50, ISBN: 9780226198125

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In a recent *New York Times* Op-Ed, law professor Campos (2015) drew attention to the troubling problem of rising tuition costs at public universities in the United States, which have quadrupled in inflation-adjusted dollars over the past 35 years. Although the piece generated much debate about its questionable headline claim that state appropriations to public higher education have actually increased (for contrasting data, see The College Board, 2014), a more defensible secondary point that Campos makes is that much of the rise of higher education spending is being driven by the well-known expansion of academic administration (for a trenchant critique, see for example, Ginsberg, 2013). As Campos notes, ‘administrative positions ... grew by 60 percent between 1993 and 2009’, compared with far more modest growth in tenure-track faculty.

Whereas some significant part of this growth is linked to rising administrative salaries, a quite consequential part of this picture is the marked growth in the number of programs that colleges and universities are expected to administer. As an investigative report by Marcus (2014) put it, ‘since 1987, universities have also started or expanded departments devoted to marketing, diversity, disability, sustainability, security, environmental health, recruiting, technology, and fundraising, and added new majors and graduate and athletics programs, satellite campuses, and conference centers’. Importantly, programs like these are the kind that one might expect from a modern university that is accountable to its stakeholders: expanding support systems for students, improving a university’s commitment to limiting its environmental impact, complying with federal reporting and disclosure requirements, and providing access to high-quality research and teaching technologies. Many of these follow from the university’s interest in remaining open, engaged and participatory. Moreover, as these programs are put into place, they generate new flows of information that tend to make administrative growth self-reinforcing: Information demands action. For universities, action means new task forces, committees, monitoring programs, and staff positions.

This example brings me to Baumgartner and Jones's fantastic new book on the *Politics of Information*. At the outset, the authors identify a core problem for government, which clearly applies for organizations of all types, including universities. As this point is central to the book, it is worth quoting directly its opening words:

Good government requires sound mechanisms for detecting problems and prioritizing them for action. But the better the performance of the search mechanisms, the more likely is public policy action on the problems detected. And the more government action, the larger and more intrusive the government. We call this tension the *paradox of search*.

[This paradox] involves at its heart a tension between allowing full and free participation in the detection and discovery of public problems and orderly government in which policies are carefully implemented through hierarchies. One can have order and control, or one can have diversity and open search processes and "participatory democracy." In theory these could occur in continual balance. This does not, however, work out so well in practice. (p. 5)

This wise statement, it is worth noting, would be equally true if all instances of 'government' above were replaced with the more general term 'administration'. Indeed, a very similar process appears to be taking place with the rise of academic administration in higher education, described above. Similar conclusions could certainly be drawn about initiatives in the business (Dobbin, 2011) and medical sectors (Starr, 2011), as in other fields.

And that is one of the great strengths of this book: Its insights resonate not only in political science and policy studies, but also in organizational theory and research more broadly. I should underscore that the book is clearly aware of this very potential, and, like the authors' classic *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (1993) and more recent *The Politics of Attention* (2005), this work is deeply indebted to Carnegie School scholars of organizational decision making including Herbert Simon, James March, Richard Cyert and Michael Cohen.

The book focuses on three primary questions that unpack the paradox of search: (i) Is search necessary for good government? (ii) Are order, control and hierarchy the enemies of search? (iii) Is search the enemy of good government? A key distinction that the authors follow forward in answering each of these questions has to do with the difference between problem definition (and prioritization) and solution search. Each situation calls for different types of information: Problem definition calls for a diversity of perspectives (*entropic information*) because incorporating multiple views helps to bring both depth and range into understanding problems; solution search demands a relatively efficient path to an answer, which usually means that expertise and specialization are privileged (*expert information*). Diverse perspectives invite diverging information yet also manifest greater uncertainty; policy solutions



require more constraint and order. These themes are followed throughout the book's investigation into all three aspects of the paradox of search.

The book is organized into three parts: the first three chapters deal with conceptual questions related to the structure of information search and its relevance for policymaking and governing, whereas the middle five chapters examine the empirics of information processing in these domains, and the concluding two chapters consider broader implications and offer thoughts about complexity more broadly.

Among the early themes in the book, one stood out most for me as useful for understanding the politics of information in organizations: the importance of incorporating redundant sources of information on complex issues. Jurisdictional battles are an important part of political struggle in any field, and are often seen as perhaps *the* defining feature of organized professions, for instance (Abbott, 1988). To minimize this friction, actors in one subunit generally want to avoid reaching into domains already covered by other jurisdictions. Yet most issues are not simple matters of engineering – consider policy matters ranging from welfare policy to environment to defense – these ‘require value judgments or experimentation with various approaches’ and demand multiple sources of information; this makes redundancy an ‘unpopular necessity’ (p. 34). Complex systems are also more adaptive when a certain amount of redundancy is built into the system, such that the failure of one unit does not endanger the viability of the whole. Redundancy isn't just about making the most informed decisions, it's also about crisis avoidance. Still, in most organizations including government, redundant efforts will more often be seen as wasteful ‘cost centers’ that could be streamlined in the interest of efficiency; following through on such streamlining may, in fact, make it easier for leaders to make decisions. The catch is that those efficient decisions are more likely to be myopic, or, more pointedly, may serve as the ‘right’ answers at the time only because the wrong questions have been asked. As Baumgartner and Jones put it, such a ‘victory for clarity will be short-lived ... [as other] aspects of complex social problems ... will eventually rear their heads’ (p. 36).

The core empirical chapters of the book are valuable for calling attention to how the paradox of search plays out both in the executive branch and, in greater depth, in Congress. Key to understanding the trajectory of post-war political information processing is what the authors call the ‘Great New-Issue Expansion’, identified through data from their seminal Policy Agendas Project. The expansion was vast: The range of issues addressed by government broadened in quite dramatic fashion from the 1950s to late 1970s; this helped to generate strong conservative counter-mobilization against what was seen as state overreach into too many new domains, and that (among other factors) helped to reduce, for instance, the number of Congressional hearings held in the years that followed (p. 123). A similar arc was also found in the Supreme Court's issue agenda and also even in media coverage of social issues (pp. 126–127). This issue expansion put government in a much better position to generate new information that could be relevant for policymakers. ‘Policy

analysis' was valorized. Yet these changes also generated greater conflict and polarization among the parties, helped to expand the interest group sector through policy feedback effects, and of course spurred changes in the technical rules that apply to both legislative and regulatory policymaking.

These shifts, in turn, had consequences for the relationship between government and society. A major point in Chapter 7 is that we can conceptualize government expansion in two dimensions: *thickening* in which already-established functions of government grow, and *broadening* in which entirely new functions are added. The analogy to other kinds of organizations is also clear here. In the corporate sector, for instance, one can see broadening primarily in the initial phases of the development of corporate environmentalism, with both greater thickening and further broadening taking place as the practice became more widely established (Hoffman, 2002). Business engagement on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) issues seems to follow a similar arc (Raeburn, 2004). In Baumgartner and Jones' telling – and there are also similarities here to other types of administration – overall bureaucratic growth is more linked to broadening than thickening (p. 153). Yet both of these processes reflect the boundary-spanning functions needed as external environments and issues become more complex: consider not just the cases like clandestine intelligence, health and transportation policy as described in this book, but large firms' enhanced need for HR specialists, compliance officers, R&D programs and sustainability offices.

The point is not just that administration tends to expand, as any good Weberian would expect. It's that the paradox stated at the outset of this book puts all policymakers in a very difficult position to avoid twin pitfalls. On the one hand, with enhanced search capacities and monitoring, bureaucracy will tend to expand and potentially overreach. On the other, intentionally or unintentionally restricting information can engender conflicts and even create crisis situations. Baumgartner and Jones certainly think that it's much worse to limit information processing than to expand administration: '[we] come down on the side of vigorous information-processing systems that are capable of detecting problems and prioritizing them for action' (p. 208). Perhaps the choice really is between bureaucracy and dilettantism in the field of administration.

One issue that I would have liked to have seen explored in greater depth is the issue of motivated reasoning, in which information is processed only selectively depending on prior expectations and politically driven cognition. The authors do, it is worth noting, discuss the issue of confirmation bias in a few sections of the book (pp. 13, 196), pointing out that public officials tend to be risk-averse and will search out information about problems that are part of their existing set of fears and biases. Beyond avoiding search, policymakers may also deny facts, and as they point out elsewhere, false information often plays a strong role in the policy process (p. 47). Although I share much of the authors' optimism that entropic search will help to overcome much of the misinformation that pervades the policy process, there are



certainly many policy domains today (consider climate change) where the information environment is tainted, if not outright polluted, by statements that are either untruthful or make use of evidence in a highly misleading fashion. And even though policymakers may have better information than others in many cases, they nonetheless need to remain responsive to constituents who – fueled by selective information made available through Internet searches, for example – expect their elected leaders to enact their will. Politically motivated search, selective information processing and confirmation biases are perhaps a much more consequential part of the story than offered in this account.

In sum, *The Politics of Information* represents not only a landmark contribution to political science and policy studies, but also greatly enriches our understanding of how organizations of all kinds manage increasingly complex and information-rich environments. The leading analysts of political agenda setting have managed, yet again, to set an influential new agenda that we would all be wise to follow.

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