

# The Politics of Information: Problem Search and Public Policy in Post-War America

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## Detailed Summary

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This manuscript addresses government's search for problems and the consequences of the search process for public policy. We offer a condensed version of our approach through what we call the *paradox of search*. If we don't seek, we won't find problems that ought to be addressed. If we do seek, we almost certainly will find problems, which we will be more likely to act upon. This can lead to a bias toward action even when it is not needed. The dynamics of government growth and restriction can be understood as a conflict between the push to understand the complex world around us and the desire to restrict information, better to control it.

We show that this is not just a hypothetical statement. Using the full range of the datasets available through the Policy Agendas Project, we present empirical analyses that trace the course of public policy in the US since World War II. By tying the nature of the search process to policy outcomes, we show that government policy is intimately tied to the search process in a manner consistent with the paradox. Better search processes lead to more intensive government policymaking. We also show that attenuation in the search process is associated with declines in policymaking activity.

In *the Politics of Attention*, we showed that organizational and institutional aspects of government, combining with the boundedly-rational characteristics of decision-makers, lead to disjoint and episodic traces of public policy activities as government focuses on a problem to the exclusion of other potential problems in the environment. It is possible to limit the nature of punctuations, which would lead to a more stable policymaking process. But because the processes we examined there are fundamental to human choice, policy punctuations are inevitable.

In the current manuscript, we examine the ways in which search processes can lead to better problem detection and hence attenuated policy punctuations (by anticipating incipient crises, for example). But we also show how the search process can lead to self-reinforcing policymaking processes that can lead to "overgovernment". This can be attacked by curtailing the search process, which itself is counterproductive. Compared to the *Politics of Attention*, which relied on analyses that aggregated time periods, the analysis in the *Politics of Information* is directly historical, detailing the path of public policy in post-WWII US.

It is fair to say that the *Politics of Attention* concentrated on what happens *after* a problem is detected by government and the *Politics of Information* centers on the problem-detection process itself.

## **Chapter 1: The Paradox of Search**

As noted above, the first chapter summarizes the argument and details the basis for the argument to come.

### **Part I: “Seek and Ye Shall Find”**

What is a good search process? The first part of the book is directed at understanding the search process itself. We distinguish between two fundamental kinds of search processes. One, which we term *expertise*, focuses on limiting the variability in how we understand a policy. The idea is to limit the variance in estimated policy outcomes, so that fewer mistakes will be made should the policy be adopted. The second, which we term *entropic search*, is based in the idea that finding the right problem to address is not easy. If we recognize that the world is filled with what former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called “unknown unknowns”—the things that we don’t know that we don’t know—we will not be well-served by a search process that limits the study of potential policy problems and actions. This model implies that the incorporation of diverse viewpoints will lead to the discovery of aspects of a complex environment that can cause problems if not addressed.

There is nothing right or wrong with either search process. Difficulties emerge when we don’t recognize that both exist, and it is the misapplication of the processes that leads to difficulties. For simple problems, expertise-based search is clearly superior. However, government faces many complex problems where entropic search is more appropriate. The struggle between these two approaches is at the core of our book.

## **Chapter 2: Information, Search, and Complexity**

Chapter 2 explains the bases for the two kinds of search, and examines the existing approaches to information and search in public policy.

## **Chapter 3: Organizing for Expertise or Organizing for Entropy?**

This chapter develops the thesis that different organizational forms are associated with the two basic search processes, with hierarchy working best in the expert search process but overlapping and complex forms with competing grants of authority working best in the case of entropic search.

## **Chapter 4: From Clarity to Complexity in Congress**

A major component of information gathering and assessment in the US government is the congressional committee system. Chapter 4 shows how our measure of entropic search can be used to assess the congressional committee system using the Policy Agendas dataset on congressional hearings. The method is based on a table of issues (the major topics of the Policy Agendas datasets) organized by committees, so that each entry is what proportion of a committee's business concentrated on a particular issue. We calculate summary entropy coefficients and trace the magnitudes of these from the 80<sup>th</sup> to the 110<sup>th</sup> Congresses. The measure increases until the late 1970s, then peaks and slightly declines. We conclude that entropic search in Congress increasingly incorporated more diverse viewpoints from the Second World War to the late 1970s, and ceased to do so afterward.

## **Part II: The Consequences of Search**

The second part of the book explores the policymaking dynamics that stem from changes in the nature of search in the US after 1978. These changes affected not just the legislative branch, but the executive branch as well, as the policy analytic bureaus were curtailed or eliminated beginning in the Reagan administration at the same time that entropic congressional search peaked and began to decline. We show the expected changes in the policy process associated with these changes in search.

### **Chapter 5: The Search for Information and the Great New Issue Expansion**

We distinguish between the *thickening* of government, in which government grows within areas it has traditionally occupied, and the *broadening* of government, in which government becomes involved in areas that it previously left to civil society. Broadening is associated with traditional views of agenda-setting, defined as the situation when a social condition becomes actively viewed as a public problem. This problem-definition process is directly related to entropic search: the more diverse the viewpoints represented in government, the more likely problems are to be defined and addressed.

In this chapter, we develop a straightforward measure of agenda expansion based on the number of Policy Agendas subtopics addressed within the hearings process, a measure highly related to the entropic search measure presented in Chapter 4. We also apply the measure to other datasets, including public laws, Supreme Court decisions, roll-call votes, and Congressional Quarterly coverage. Simple graphs of the indicator show a similar arc of issue expansion and contraction that peaks in 1978 and declines afterward. For some of the indicators, such as hearings not involving legislation, the decline does not occur, documenting the bureaucratic oversight and legislative adjustment that is necessary once new policies have been established as a consequence of what we term "the Great New-Issue Expansion".

### **Chapter 6: The Thickening and Broadening of Government**

This chapter explores in more detail the differences between the thickening and broadening of government introduced in Chapter 5. Fundamentally the budgets for new issues—those involved in broadening—grow much faster than old issues—those associated with thickening. We conclude that much of the growth of government is due to broadening rather than thickening, and much of this growth occurs because problems are recognized and addressed, not because one philosophy or platform of government prevails over another.

## **Chapter 7: Budgetary Path Dependency and Disruption, 1791-2010**

We step back in this chapter and examine US expenditure patterns since 1791. Government growth over the long term can be traced to three factors: broadening, thickening, and response to crises. We re-examine budgetary theories in light of this, showing the connection between theories of path dependency and budgetary incrementalism (which assess the thickening process). We show that budgetary incrementalism leads to exponential growth in expenditures, which is path dependent in what Scott Page terms the self-reinforcing sense of the term. We find periods of crisis that are consistent with the critical moments of path dependency, but we also find serious deviations from the expenditure trace implied by a pure form of path dependency. These are associated, we suggest, with processes Associated with the broadening of government. A path dependency approach alone cannot explain the development of the US government over the long term.

## **Chapter 8: Inertia and Breakthroughs**

Chapter 8 examines budgetary policies after 1947, when data on Congressional Budget Authority by topic is available due to the efforts of the Policy Agendas Project.<sup>1</sup> When we drill down to the level of the policy topic, we find much more budgetary churning and disjoint change than one would expect from a path dependent, incrementalist model. We also find a period of programmatic experimentation, associated with large budgetary changes, during the late 1940s and 1950s, spanning the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations. This period of experimentation and large budgetary shifts dropped during the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon Administrations, and declined again, until by the Clinton Administration fully 80% of budget changes at the subfunction level were classified as incremental. Even then when changes occurred they tended to be quite substantial. Thus, while there has been declining variance in spending, there has been no movement away from punctuated equilibrium, which we demonstrated was characteristic of public spending in earlier work (Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

The picture of post-WWII programmatic budgeting suggests a burst of experimentation after the war, with increasing “lock-in” requiring considerable

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<sup>1</sup> Data on CBA are available from the US Government in consistent fashion for Office of Management and Budget subfunctions after 1976, we calculated consistent figures from 1947-1976 and made them available through the Policy Agendas Project.

effort to shift the established budgetary path. These budgetary processes correspond to the arc traced by our indicators of new issue expansion detailed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

### **Chapter 9: Rounding Up the Usual Political Suspects**

The thesis that we put forth in this manuscript implies that the standard accounts of policy change are more limited than the claims on their behalf would suggest. In particular, the idea that policy changes are due to changes in the preferences of elected officials is not directly and simply consistent with our study of agenda expansion and contraction. We studied the usual political suspects, including unified and divided government and changes in the presidency, finding little support for the idea that parties, elections, and the composition of government are the key to policy changes. We do, however, find a role for what Peterson, Grossback, Stimson, and Gangl call mandate elections. Our analysis sets the arc of new issue expansion against the party and election based analyses, and does not rule out more sophisticated versions of the direct party control hypothesis.

### **Chapter 10: Complexity, Information, and the Broadening of Government**

In this concluding chapter we draw lessons from the politics of search and information detailed in the manuscript. While we recognize the “overgovernment” that seems inevitably to occur when vigorous search processes are employed, we reject the alternative that search should be censored either for reasons of policy (to limit the broadening of government) or for reasons of administration (to keep lines of authority clear and unambiguous). Overlapping, quasi-hierarchical structures in the search process at the policymaking and at the implementation levels best detect problems in the environment, and our evidence suggests that such systems do not lead to gridlock or lack of action because of jurisdictional fights. Even if such jurisdictional disagreements occur, they are a cost that must be paid to achieve a robust and effective search process.