## AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
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Professor Frank R. Baumgartner Department of Political Science Pennsylvania State University 106 Burrowes Building University Park PA 16802

Dear Frank:

RE: Manuscript #14035, "Punctuated Equilibrium and Institutional Friction in Comparative Perspective"

We have received two reviews of "Punctuated Equilibrium and Institutional Friction in Comparative Perspective," which arrived here on December 6, 2006.

I must tell you that the reviews of your paper are not encouraging enough to warrant positive action on my part. Taken in its own terms, one review (that of Reviewer 2) is fairly supportive, but my own reading of the paper and the review has led me to see the reviewer's main criticisms as more disabling than the reviewer him/herself seems to. The reviewer begins by noting, correctly, that the paper's main strength is the data and that the paper doesn't aim to "add much to theory." The latter comment identifies a major shortcoming of the paper insofar as its priority for publication in the Review is concerned; it's not a problem per se, but it does damage the paper's chances of coming to the very front of the queue among the papers submitted for consideration here. As you know, I can take favorable action on only 8% to 10% of these papers, and one that doesn't have much to offer by way of a new theoretical contribution begins with a strike against it. Having posited the data as the paper's main contribution, this reviewer goes on to point to what s/he considers an important limitation of the data – that the data you analyze don't provide persuasive evidence of the interpretation you put on them. All in all, although this reviewer is favorably disposed toward the paper, as also noted above, the shortcomings and limitations that s/he notes make it difficult for me to rate it as a high priority for publication here. Reviewer 3 is less favorably disposed toward the paper, and his/her concerns are no less problematic. S/He characterizes the paper as "replicative, rather than path breaking"; again, being replicative isn't a bad thing, but neither is it a feature that is likely to raise a paper to the top among those considered here. Moreover, while this reviewer would agree that the data constitute the strength of the paper, s/he doesn't think that you've derived nearly as much benefit as you could from the comparative aspect of the data. This reviewer makes an array of other points as well, including some presentation ones and some others having to do with a disjuncture between research questions, on the one hand, and data-driven answers, on the other.

Overall, these reviews don't provide me with a sufficient basis to move forward toward publishing this paper. Thus, I am now going to close the review process by declining the opportunity to publish it. Even an extremely positive third review wouldn't have tipped the scales in the paper's favor, given the points that the two reviewers have offered, so it seems sensible simply to move on rather than delaying matters any further by awaiting the arrival of a third review.

Thanks for letting us consider your work. I hope and trust you will find these reviews helpful as you continue to think about these issues and rework this paper for submission elsewhere. If you have any comments concerning this review process, I would be pleased to receive them.

Very truly yours,

Lee Sigelman

Editor

American Political Science Review Reviewer # 3 Manuscript # 14035

Title: "Punctuated Equilibrium and Institutional Friction in Comparative Perspective"

This work evaluates hypotheses about institutional friction and a punctuated equilibrium model of public policy by looking at three different types of activities across three different systems of governing. Specifically, it looks at system inputs (election outcomes and media stories), system process (legislative proposals, hearings, executive orders), and system outcomes (statutes and budget changes) for the US, Denmark, and Belgium. In all three cases the empirical analysis concludes that there is increasingly greater friction as the process proceeds from input through process through outcomes. The authors conclude that this provides support for the hypothesis that institutional friction affects the probability of change in these outputs. The main merit of the work is in providing further support for a punctuated equilibrium model of policy making originally proposed by Baumgartner and Jones.

I like this project. However, the authors would need to work more on the presentation and analysis for me to recommend publication. Here are my concerns.

---The general presentation is currently too opaque for most readers. Indeed, I'm not sure that given the space limitations of a journal that it can be made transparent enough for a good presentation of what was done here. I had to go to chapter five of *The Politics of Attention* to have the vaguest idea of what the authors were talking about in their discussion of kurtosis and policy change.

The authors discuss that non-normality would be a characteristic of policy changes in systems functioning under a theory of punctuated equilibrium. However, no proof is offered here and readers really need to read the earlier work to "get it".

Jones and Baumgartner and these authors claim that an analysis of the probability distributions associated with policy inputs, process, and outcomes can provide a measure of the relative efficiency of governmental activities. The argument is that the more closely the shape of the respective probability distributions align to normality, the more efficient governmental activities. A larger disjuncture between shapes of the probability distributions across processes implies greater friction and less efficiency.

Again, it will not be clear to most readers why this is so. I personally buy the argument, but I'm not sure it is well enough developed here without readers having to go back to the Jones and Baumgartner book for discussion.

Thus, it may be that this work would be better situated in a book.

----- On pp. 3, 12, and throughout the authors raise the question of whether "some governmental designs are more efficient than others" in translating inputs to policy

outcomes. Yet, I don't see a real effort to answer this question in either the empirical analysis or in theory.

What should we see different in the graphs in Figures 5 and 6 in order to conclude that governmental design makes a difference? Indeed, in Figure 5 one is tempted to conclude that there is no difference between a separation of powers system and a parliamentary system for the cases of the US and Belgium. However, there appears to be more friction for budgetary outcomes in Denmark. What is a reader to make of this and how does it tie back to the stated purposes of the work.

More generally, it is not clear from the presentation that there was any value added from the comparative perspective. The authors do not highlight differences in institutional friction across the three systems and how this translates empirically into differences in process or outcomes. As it stands, the authors are simply reinforcing the results of Jones and Baumgartner (2005). Then this study is replicative, rather than path breaking as with the earlier work.

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This is a highly professional and accomplished piece of work that adds substantially to comparative knowledge about policy change. It takes a new body of work on punctuated equilibrium, which mainly relates to the US, and examines hypotheses with regard to the different impact of institutions on the processing of demands for policy change. The main strength of the paper is its data, which extends the country cases on this topic from one to three with many thousands of observations within each country one. It is very important to know that the findings of Baumgartner and Jones may be generalised comparatively. SXuch is their contribution, that I cannot think of distribution of policy agendas and outputs that have the normal shape. It is a mark of their achievement in finding this distribution that it seems to happen everywhere – the second generation of these studies of which this one is about the extent.

The paper does not aim to add much to theory as it develops the work of Baumgartner and Jones. I am not sure the opening sections on complexity add very much to the argument. There is no time dimension to the empirical analysis, for example saying the more complexity increases punctuations (that would be interesting!). These pages provide the long background (which could be shortened). The paper effectively starts on page 3, maybe later. In general, these sections over the first 14 pages are prolix. I do find the summary of the B and J work very clear, however. The hypotheses are plausible ones to test, and follow on from the discussion. It is right to argue

that friction and implementation are going to vary the punctuations.

One dimension they do not discuss is the interaction between the two

– does implementation-based institutional friction amplify the

punctuations - or does it do the opposite or not at all?

I have always wondered whether it is possible to sum up the institutional functioning of political systems by simple descriptors. Most political systems have a large number of blockages, but all can act fast when they really want to, say to address a large problem when the political will is there. Is the institution the same beast as it changes over time? The main question is whether the variations in friction within political systems are less than those that occur across them? This paper asserts this claim, but it does not address this in any measurement sense (e.g. how long it takes to pass legislation, whether outturn and planned budgets are different). The stark differences between the political systems is strongly claimed, but is not substantiated, even by other comparative literatures (e.g. the veto players literature, and the comparative historical institutionalism literature). Given the amount of space used in the first 14 pages, it was shame that these points were not addressed, especially in a quantitative fashion. With some take on the differences between political systems, there could emerge a discussion about whether the extent of institutional difference leads to difference in the extent of the punctuations. There is also the problem of distinguishing within political systems. Figure 1 displays this weakness – does the arrow indicate a unit of measurement? Probably not, but it should.

The amount and presentation of the data are impressive as are the figures. What I did not like was the frequency distribution imposed along the top without explanation.

I have no complaint against the data which is analysed highly professionally acknowledging problems where they occur. They confirm their hypotheses, which is an important advance in knowledge.

The conclusion brings us back to the complexity argument (which is not addressed in the data analysis).

Overall, this is a highly publishable piece of work suitable for the Review. I am very impressed with it. It needs a bit of work to address the points above (summarised below), but such points should not detract from an important advance in the study of comparative politics and in political science generally.

I found the appendix to be too long.

## I recommend that:

a) the complexity argument be limited to one paragraph

b) that more attention is placed on the literature of comparative institutionalism

c) that measures of institutional difference be incorporated into the analysis and be compared to the results

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d) that the interaction between implementation and institutional difference is discussed