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The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems, by Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner

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Book Reviews

The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems, by Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner. University of Chicago Press, 2005. 316 pp. \$70.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Reviewed by KATHLEEN KNIGHT

Trying to predict the outcomes of the policy process is like trying to predict how each kernel of popcorn will behave when exposed to heat. The process is not simply complicated by the number and size of kernels, the power and fidelity of the microwave, the shape of the container for the popcorn, the use of accelerants, etc. It is made complex by uncertainty, the multiple levels of interactions between policies and the members of a policy's sub-system (which may overlap), simultaneity, and disproportionate response. In *The Politics of Attention*, Jones and Baumgartner propose a general theory of information processing and prioritization by government to account for the non-incremental nature of policy change. The book is a worthy successor to the classic *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Baumgartner and Jones), and expands on the ideas of punctuated equilibria, attention cycles, mobilization, and agenda setting developed there.

In addition to its celebrity status in public policy, *Agendas and Instability* quickly became a standard text among students of political communication because of its focus on measuring media attention and its extensive validation of media attention indicators. For those who might be tempted to assign *Politics of Attention* in mass media courses without a close reading, it might be useful to note that *Politics of Attention* is not the same book as *Agendas and Instability*. While it provides an eloquent summary of the 1993 book with its brilliant synthesis of earlier insights about political communication and policy-making, *Politics of Attention* goes far beyond this in terms of generalizing and testing an integrated model of policy change. Information processing is central to the theory offered, but much more attention was paid to the details of measuring the role of the mass media in the definition and redefinition of specific policies in the earlier work. Both books deserve a place on graduate reading lists.

The analysis in *The Politics of Attention* is made possible by a massive effort at data collection and coding called the "Policy Agendas Project." This enterprise has produced systematized observations of agenda-setting inputs and governmental response across a broad range of specific policies over time. Updates on the project, further details on the policy coding scheme, and the data itself can be obtained from www.policyagendas.org. These observations allow a dynamic macro-policy approach to the examination of the policy process and broader issues of representation. A third stage of the project is now in progress that extends the data collection to other countries.

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Jones and Baumgartner propose stochastic process methods to accommodate a general analysis of public policy change and allow testing of their “general punctuation hypothesis.” The methodology, while initially daunting, is very well explained in the book and its appendices. The authors are also careful to point out that the approach is not meant as a substitute for traditional methods of policy analysis, but rather as a tool for understanding the general forces that affect all policy processes. Instead of attempting to predict the trajectory of each popcorn kernel, they identify variables and boundary conditions that affect all of them.

Among the insights gained from the general punctuation hypothesis is the importance of institutional friction in retarding the smooth translation of external demands into policy outputs. In part because of limited processing capacity and the need to juggle a large number of issues, decision makers respond disproportionately to information—at times ignoring signals from the environment and the public and at other times overreacting. Overcoming institutional friction, and the demands of other issues, requires a great deal of effort to shift decision makers’ attention and reprioritize the issue on the institutional agenda. Thus, information processing, as shifts in attention, provides a key to explaining the linkage between public demands and policy response over time, and the non-incremental nature of policy change.

The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism, by Clifford Rob. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 237 pp. \$70.00 cloth, \$24.99 paper.

Reviewed by ELIZABETH FOX

This important book examines how social movements in the developing world gain or fail to gain international NGO support and the costs and benefits of this support. It asks why a handful of local movements attract global attention and powerful transnational networks while others do not and, ultimately, whether this support matters. Rob argues that needy groups vie with one another for the world’s sympathy. He demonstrates this with cases studies of movements successful in attracting international activists and NGOs, the Ogoni in Nigeria and the Zapatistas in Mexico, matched with movements in the same countries that failed to attract international support. Rob uses a marketing-based analysis of costs and benefits to show that NGOs have strong incentives to devote themselves to the movements whose profiles most closely match their own requirements and not necessarily to the neediest group. This less than altruistic support by NGOs can be a mixed blessing due to the distortions or changes that it causes on the original objectives or methods of the movements.

NGOs and the media both play roles in attracting international support. The Zapatistas, for example, relied on diffuse international consciousness raising, mostly by orchestrating media and Internet reports. The author observes, however, that a movement’s message filtered through journalistic lenses will not necessarily represent an insurgent’s group

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