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## Review Article

# A missing link? Connecting agenda setting research and interest group studies

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Over the last 25 years, the policy agendas project developed by Baumgartner and Jones has proved a prominent source of inspiration for a generation of European scholars. With their 1993 publication of *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* and subsequent books and articles, Baumgartner and Jones have engaged in a major exercise of agenda setting themselves. A vibrant community of European scholars has thus applied their framework to a wide range of empirical settings. The field of agenda setting studies is not the only one to have attracted increasing attention in recent decades. Notably, the interest group field has also experienced considerable growth, and – incidentally – other parts of Baumgartner’s work have been intensively cited in this scholarship (Bunea and Baumgartner, 2014). While interest groups studies also customarily refer to the importance of agenda setting, the finer lessons from the agenda setting literature have typically not been informing interest group studies. The recent publication of *The Politics of Information. Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America* (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015) provides a good reason to reassess the potential for increased cross-fertilizing between the fields of agenda setting and interest group studies.

The statement ‘Control the flow of information and you can control the growth of government’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015, p. 183) captures one of the central insights in the book. Searching for and processing information are seen as critical drivers of agenda expansion and ultimately of public policy. In analyses of the US political development from 1950 until today, the authors illustrate how an increasing number of issue areas have received the attention of the US political system and how this has resulted in a so-called ‘broadening’ of government, which intervenes in more and more issues. With a high point in the late 1970s, the process has slowed down or even reversed course more recently. Again, there is a close link between information processing and recent developments in public policy.

For interest groups, it will come as no surprise that information is central to achieving political objectives. Surveys among groups demonstrate that precious resources are



spent on collecting policy-relevant information and thus qualifying the viewpoints of groups and their input to policymakers. Interest group scholars customarily emphasize that much of interest group politics is about getting the attention of policymakers. Here, information serves as the main currency groups bring to bear when it comes to accessing and influencing decision makers. Differences in group access and influence are also largely seen as an effect of relative capacities to provide relevant information. Where group scholars may take inspiration from this book is therefore not so much in its emphasis on the central political role of information, but rather in its focus on how different patterns of information input affect the quality of policymaking.

For Baumgartner and Jones, government is about addressing problems. They portray governments as complex systems interacting dynamically with their environment. Central to the functioning of these systems is the ability to detect, prioritize and address a dynamic flow of changing challenges. In short: How does government decide what is a problem and what isn't? To address the utility of information the book distinguishes between entropic search and expert search. In technical areas – where problems are simple – it is most relevant to rely on expert search, involving a limited range of the most knowledgeable actors. But many problems that government faces are not that simple. Here, entropic search, which incorporates diverse viewpoints into decision-making processes, is more relevant. A greater diversity of perspectives may generate a wider array of information and policy-making processes that involves diverse viewpoints and information helps government arrive at better policy solutions.

A main take-away from the book is this emphasis on evaluating the flow of information from a normative or at least ideological perspective, by discussing how different patterns of information supply benefit the ability to govern. Interest group scholars typically start out their articles by pointing to the democratic relevance of groups (and by derivation the study of groups), but this is mainly discussed as a matter of representation, that is, whether different citizens are able to have their voices heard. Most research brushes aside normative considerations and moves on to develop hypotheses about the type of strategies group use, their political influence or other aspects of group behavior. Here, the literature may benefit from turning things upside down to evaluate the group input from the perspective of public officials or of the public, who are affected by government policy. Studying the flow of interest group input to governmental processes in terms of the degree of diversity in viewpoints and informational content will thus bring attention to a series of interesting questions.

Most fundamental is the issue of whether organized interests can serve as a substitute for other sources of information. In their book, Baumgartner and Jones focus much on 'inside' government sources of information, as they argue, for example, that what appear as inefficient governmental structures may in fact be beneficial, in that 'Where one institution develops an incomplete perspective on a complex issue or follows a policy that ignores important elements of social need, another is likely to



raise the question' (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015, p. 33). In this view, conflict and competition inherent in governmental structures are appropriate when it comes to addressing complex problems; moreover, efforts at rationalizing come at a cost in terms of diversity. With these emphases, the US system of checks-and-balances appears well-suited for ensuring diversity in decision making. From a European perspective, it seems obvious to ask if other instruments may also serve to ensure sufficient diversity in the information available to policymakers. Is it indeed not more efficient to build simple and non-overlapping governmental structures and rely on external actors to ensure that important elements of problems are not ignored? The potential for interest groups to fulfill this function of alerting government to critical aspects of policy demands a diverse interest group system, or at least a system where systematic biases do not keep important viewpoints from being fed into the decision-making process.

A first empirical issue thus relates to mapping the diversity in interest group input to public policy. Closely related is the need to examine the factors that may systematically disrupt the chain of communication from groups to decision makers. While the issue of barriers to group formation has been intensively studied, including the factors affecting the use of influence strategies and the access obtained by groups and their political influence, less systematic attention has been given to how interest groups supply decision makers with information and the factors that may affect this process. What may be central for future work is to evaluate these findings from the perspective of the policymaker: To what extent is a sufficiently diverse set of viewpoints being channeled into decision-making processes? Or, if we have no good standards to judge 'sufficiently diverse', what are the factors making interest group input more or less diverse?

Another crucial issue is whether the information supplied by groups is reliable and of sufficient quality. Baumgartner and Jones thus point to the importance of presenting information and analysis in an unbiased and non-partisan manner. Groups are at the outset advocates of specific viewpoints. In a sense information from groups is therefore always biased. A group organizing school teachers can only be expected to convey information that supports the beneficial effects of spending money on education, and a group of pharmaceutical companies cannot be expected to publish reports pointing to the benefits of more strict regulation of drug advertisements. Beyond the incentives to cherry pick the 'correct' information is the tendency emphasized by Baumgartner and Jones of all policy actors to be more aware of information that supports existing beliefs. For two reasons, however, this may not be as severe a problem as it initially appears. First, groups face strong incentives not to supply incorrect information, in that their reputation as being reliable is a major asset for future lobbying efforts. Second, the interests of most groups are in fact rather obvious, making it evident that to all that groups provide evidence that backs up their own causes. Policymakers may therefore have a much harder time judging information from sources that seek to appear objective than information coming from



organized interests. If various groups supply information in support of their own preferences, the overall information may well benefit policymakers.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the relevance of Baumgartner and Jones' understanding of rationality among political actors. The notion of bounded rationality is an underlying theme in much of their work. In the present book it is one of the main drivers of the politics of information. As they argue 'People want many contradictory things and they cannot prioritize clearly one set of goals ahead of another – trade-offs among incommensurate goals are very difficult' (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015, p. 43). In contrast, present-day interest group scholars implicitly or explicitly perceive interest groups as rational actors in the sense that groups are expected to pursue a set of relatively fixed preferences including obtaining political goals and maintaining group membership. Little attention is devoted to understanding how groups come to pursue specific goals and how groups may moderate their goals in the course of the policy process. Again, if we are to evaluate the contributions groups make to solving societal problems, it is crucial to enhance our understanding of these issues. In fact, one of the classic arguments for setting up corporatist institutions was exactly that these might help opposing interests arrive at good policy solutions. Present-day institutional solutions for interest intermediation also deserve attention not only for the access they provide societal interests but also for the ability to help groups and governments prioritize among problems and adopt viable policy solutions.

## References

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