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## Review Article

# Information and politics in American policy trends: Review symposium for *The Politics of Information*

Baumgartner Frank R. and Bryan D. Jones  
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The US federal government expanded its information gathering capabilities at the same time that it broadened its issue agenda and enlarged its scope. As government's search capacity plateaued or declined after the 1970s, so did the breadth of its mission. In *The Politics of Information*, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones track these monumental shifts and argue that they are related: Government expanded because it found new problems to address whenever it searched – when it stopped looking, it stopped expanding.

Any new book by Baumgartner and Jones would be valuable as an update on the evolution of their thinking about the policy process and American politics. *The Politics of Information* also stands alone as an important work on the political effects of information. It offers an abundance of useful trends and theoretical insight, though it likely overemphasizes the causal role of problem detection in policy-making history.

## Trends in American Policymaking

The book tracks the rise and fall of institutions for promoting informed policymaking, including the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The GAO substantially expanded its role in the 1970s, producing broad and useful reports. The CBO, which began in 1975, increased the use of accurate policy projections. Even after a staffing decline, more people work in Congressional support agencies today than for either the House or Senate.

Although Congressional committee jurisdictions have been roughly stable, many committees simultaneously expanded their domains. The number of topics covered across all committees increased in the 1960s and plateaued in the 1980s. The diversity of subjects addressed within each committee similarly increased throughout



the 1970s and peaked in the 1980s, even though bill introductions steadily declined. Committee work shifted to oversight: In the late 1960s, 60 per cent of hearings covered legislation; by 2005, only 11 per cent did so.

All measures show similar trends: An expansion in the scope of government activity in the 1960s followed by a plateau or reversal. When government searched for problems, it addressed them with new programs and policies. Baumgartner and Jones find that these trends are not easily explained by political factors like election results. But they acknowledge some role for partisan politics; after gaining control of Congress in the 1994 election, Republicans centralized power over committees and reduced research staff.

## Theoretical Contributions

The new book's theoretical lens borrows from their previous books, *The Politics of Attention* and *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Government relies on information to prioritize problems, but high cognitive costs create friction between observation and action. As unsolved problems build up, they lead to occasional punctuations when government scrambles to address long-festering problems. Terrorism provides an example: Information about the problem's extent accumulated gradually with little action until the attacks of September 11th, which stimulated an extensive restructuring of government and a substantial expansion of its intelligence capabilities.

The additional theoretical hook of *The Politics of Information* connects these patterns to broad trends in American governance. Baumgartner and Jones offer a new understanding of the mid-century surge in policymaking, calling it a 'great agenda bubble' and 'new issue expansion' that enlarged government's scope more than its size. Because government finds more things to do if it looks for new problems, conservatives often seek to constrain the search process. The conservative resurgence was tied to increased opposition to searching for new problems and a move toward oversight. Because the search process changes before the policy trajectory, analysts can predict policy shifts by tracking the information considered in government.

## Analysis and Critique

Like all broad views of policymaking, the arguments in *The Politics of Information* have important limits. Government information search capacity plays an important role in policymaking, but we cannot conclude that the growth of government comes about because problems are recognized rather than because one side wins a political debate. Does it make sense to say that liberals advanced the Great Society because they discovered poverty and civil rights as problems? The 2014 film *Selma* stimulated another rehashing of the relative importance of President Lyndon Johnson and Martin



Luther King, Jr. in advancing civil rights legislation. But surely both mass movements and executive leadership were more important in policy change than committee hearings or agency research. The focus on search capacity is nonetheless vital for understanding how policy developed further: Newly created civil rights agencies searched for and found new problems, which led to the expansion of Affirmative Action and its extension to other social groups (Skrentny, 2004).

The book's claim that limits to information collection and problem recognition helped bring about the conservative counter-revolution is insufficiently evidenced. Political and policy goals likely played a role in both the increase in government search capacity and its decline. The book focuses on the political effects of changing information gathering, rather than explaining policymakers' initial motivations to enhance search capacity or the historical reasons that research agencies lost favor.

The book's emphasis on problem definition as a key factor driving policymaking is only somewhat convincing. Certainly, some political arguments address the scope of problems – but others are mainly about power, ideology or resources. Like all policy process theories, the factors emphasized by Baumgartner and Jones apply better to some issue areas than others. Changes in nuclear energy policy in the 1970s involved large changes in attention, image and committee jurisdiction – but there may be few policy changes that share all of these traits.

*The Politics of Information* provides some evidence that changes in the search process preceded changes in policy output. The main tests indicate that Congress changed the scope and diversity of its committee hearings before it changed its output of new laws. Yet the intent to expand government could still have preceded the search process. As Kingdon (1984) put it, solutions are often developed before the problems they supposedly solve. Important trends identified in the book, such as committee hearing topic coverage and lawmaking, have a curvilinear shape – but not all rise and fall together.

Two examples from the book help illustrate the difficulty of assigning a causal role to information gathering rather than policy preferences. In the case of the evolving Republican position on a national health insurance mandate, Baumgartner and Jones state: 'A change in issue understanding caused a radical shift in preferences' (p. 43). But none of the common explanations for Republican opposition to the individual mandate support this view: Some observers say the initial pro-mandate stance was just a negotiating position in the 1993 health-care battle; some claim Republicans were poised to oppose any Obama proposal; others see it as part of a broader Republican rightward ideological shift; still others argue that opposition to the mandate was simply the best legal argument. In any case, political and policy preferences were central, not any new realization about the proposal's impact.

Baumgartner and Jones also cite the example of conservative opposition to funding research on gun violence, which was certainly a politicized fight over information. But would any gun control measure have passed as a result of more research? Information control may be used as a public relations weapon, even if

knowing more would not change your mind. The recent change in CBO budget projection rules (known as dynamic scoring) shows that Republicans can also use research institutions to their advantage, but they would still favor tax cuts without any informational changes.

The book is also limited by its focus on government-provided information. The period covered featured a rise in lobbying, think tanks and university research. More studies are produced today on nearly all social problems and policy issues than in the 1960s. Information continued to expand dramatically – but the new research was conducted outside of government.

The authors do prove that group mobilization followed the expansion of policy. But that hardly shows that interest groups were uninvolved in the expansion of the scope of government. In my own book (Grossmann, 2014), I compile policy historians' explanations for policy adoptions. At least according to policy history books, interest groups are consistently more important in policy change than research or ideas, and there has been little change in the relative importance of these factors from the 1960s to today.

If not information, what does explain the dramatic rise and fall in the scope of American policymaking? Unfortunately, the list of potential causal factors is long: social protest and riots, liberal public opinion, Democratic Congressional majorities, interest group diversification, expansion of the administrative state, broadening of elite concern, and changes in seniority and partisanship in Congress. Perhaps expansionary policymaking required a confluence of supportive factors.

## Synthesis and Future Directions

Paul Burstein's work on the fate of congressional proposals offers an interesting contrast to this book. Burstein also argues that congressional hearings are important, but finds problem definition largely inconsequential. Policy proponents, he finds, spend substantial time illustrating the severity of the problem they seek to address. But opponents quickly grant the problem and focus their testimony on the proposal's costs and its unintended consequences. They question the proposed policy, rather than minimizing the problem. Take climate change: Liberals complain about global warming denial and believe it explains aversion to carbon taxes or trading. But opposition to the policies could actually be affecting views of the problem. Experiments find more conservative receptivity to scientific consensus when they are offered a free market solution, rather than government intervention (Campbell and Kay, 2014).

*The Politics of Information* could also be usefully combined with investigations of the changing policy tools of American government. The book reports that federal government employment has declined since the 1960s, accompanied by an increase in subnational governments and quasi-governments dependent on federal largesse.



Other scholars have studied ‘the hollow state’, where private contractors carry out government functions, ‘the delegated state’, where the federal government relies on mandates for states, localities and non-profits, and ‘the hidden welfare state’, where the tax code is used to achieve varied policy goals (Howard, 1999; Milward and Provan, 2000; Morgan and Campbell, 2011). These policy tools seem to have become politically acceptable after the growth of federal programs plateaued; perhaps the role of national government evolved rather than contracted. The cross-national literature on welfare state-building and retrenchment may also offer lessons. Perhaps the growth of government’s scope was tied to worldwide economic modernization and a conservative backlash was inevitable given sufficient government expansion.

The book should stimulate new work on changes in policy information processing. Information is certainly wielded by all sides, but that does not mean it is the source of political preferences or policy trends. To conservatives, the idea that government should continually search for new problems to solve in Washington will sound like a political preference. But conservatives do not always seek less information. Conservative commentator Jim Manzi (2012) argues that all social policies should first be pursued in small randomized controlled trials and slowly scaled up only if proven effective and without other consequences. Conveniently, Manzi’s proposed search process fits his limited vision of the role of government. The future will be written by those with access to information, but it is too early to say what policy trends will accompany its use and transformation.

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