

REVIEWS

THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION: PROBLEM DEFINITION AND THE COURSE OF PUBLIC POLICY IN AMERICA

Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones

The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 264 pp, £19.50 (pb), ISBN: 9780226198125

Baumgartner and Jones' first collaborative book from 1993, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, represents a milestone in policy agenda-setting research. Its theoretical and methodological ideas today inspire a large international research community on policy agenda-setting. Their next landmark book was the *Politics of Attention* from 2005. The ideas of that book are so radical and of such scope that they have the potential to transform the way we think about politics and the way we study it. Now Baumgartner and Jones have changed gear again and launched *The Politics of Information*. The book does not represent as radical a break with standard political science method and theory as the *Politics of Attention* book from 2005, but it does offer a very important and critical perspective on the way most scholars and practitioners today think about organization and government.

In *The Politics of Information* Baumgartner and Jones analyse the development of the American government since World War II and identify a central tension in government that is relevant well beyond the case of the American government. It is a tension between the search for problems and solutions on the one hand and the need for order and control to implement workable solutions on the other. If we understand perfectly the problems and the best solutions to them, then clear organizational rules and procedures would be the obvious choice. However, Baumgartner and Jones argue, in many cases we do not quite understand the causes of a social problem and may disagree over whether a given condition even merits government attention. With this uncertainty (complexity), organizational clarity is a danger as it can lead to 'tunnel vision', which ignores the multiplicity of potentially relevant perspectives. Thus, a central theme in this book is the trade-off between organizational structures that facilitate effective implementation of solutions and organizational structures that promote the identification of new problems and new solutions.

The tension between the desire for clear organizational rules and finding the proper fit with the organizational problem environment represents an old debate in public administration. As the authors note in chapter 2, prominent scholars such as Herbert Simon, Robert Dahl, James March and Johan Olsen in various ways make the claim that no organizational structure can optimize on specialization, problem prioritization, supervision *and* control. Baumgartner and Jones not only reiterate this tension; they also raise a strong critical voice against the one-sided focus on management and clear administrative control that characterizes many present-day government reorganizations. Consistent with their solid foundation in the bounded rationality perspective, they note that: 'One of the biggest mistakes in political life is to believe that we understand more than we do. This is the temptation of clarity' (p. 51).

The first three chapters of the book are devoted to a detailed discussion of this basic tension in politics and administration. The authors do not generalize the argument beyond the US case, but there is nothing particularly American about their argument. The empirical chapters of the book, chapters 4 to 8, tell a fascinating story about the development of the US government, utilizing data from the Policy Agendas Project in new and informative ways. The comprehensive time series data include congressional hearings, budgets, associations, numbers of employees in the executive branch of government, numbers of executive agencies, and numbers of bills. Readers without a particular interest in the development of the post-World War II American government can get valuable inspiration from just reading the first part of the book.

I highly recommend this book to everyone interested in public administration and politics for several reasons. First, even though the idea of a structure–attention (or structure–information) link is not new, it deserves much more attention from scholars as well as practitioners. With a few exceptions (e.g. Hammond 1993; Hammond *et al.* 2007) very few scholars have systematically investigated how organizations structure information. Instead, there has been an obsession with the control and management perspective. However, if the government cannot identify important problems, if it cannot characterize them properly, and if it cannot do so in a timely manner, then even the leanest and most efficient government would fail in its most important task of providing solutions to important societal problems. From that perspective, the book strongly criticizes the preference satisfaction approach to politics: ‘... much of politics is not about matching policies to preferences but rather centers on the definition of problems and the design of policy solutions’ (p. 7).

Second, although the book does not engage in these debates directly, it offers an important contribution to several public administration literatures. One is the performance management literature with its focus on clear goals, clear responsibilities and simple information systems. Baumgartner and Jones’ argument for organizational redundancies and complex information about complex problems is almost orthogonal to the normative prescriptions of the performance management doctrine: ‘As social problems are complex, a wider range of information provides a better context for decision making than a narrowly focused discussion’ (p. 47). Similarly, they are not impressed by the government-supported ‘evidence-based’ approaches to public administration which seem to flourish in sectors such as educational policy. According to Baumgartner and Jones, such programmes represent a naïve attempt to censor the information so that only ‘good’ information can be incorporated into the policy debate (p. 199).

More generally, the book attempts to integrate policy agenda-setting and public administration research, which is a major contribution and a most welcome invitation in times when large parts of the public administration field seem to be carried away by management ideas that largely ignore the intimate relationship between politics and administration. Thus, in case someone needs to be reminded about this relationship, I sincerely recommend the pleasure of digesting *The Politics of Information*.

Empirically, their findings related to the broadening and thickening of government over time speak to the literature on rule dynamics (see Schulz 1998; Van Witteloostuijn and de Jong 2010; Jakobsen and Mortensen 2015). Their findings seem to be consistent with this literature’s conclusions on negative density effects in rule populations. Furthermore, this literature has a strong focus on learning and problem solving rather than preference satisfaction. The empirical part of the book might have benefited from engaging in a conversation with this research field.

As I hope the above discussion illustrates, a major quality of this book is that it raises a set of questions that are of fundamental importance to the way we think about administration, government and politics. These questions can easily motivate and justify several new research fields, and I hope that *Public Administration* readers will take up Baumgartner and Jones' challenge to theoretically and empirically investigate the role of information in politics and administration.

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Peter B. Mortensen
Aarhus University