

LOBBYING AND POLICY CHANGE. WHO WINS, WHO LOSES, AND WHY

Frank. R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball and Beth L. Leech

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The majority of policy issues are characterized by stability. The structure of policy communities is, according to the authors of this book, one of the major reasons why the status quo prevails. The nature of most policy issues is complex and characterized by multiple dimensions along which interest groups can mobilize. Defenders and opponents of the status quo, 'policy sides' in the words of the authors, are heterogeneous and evenly matched. Information about potential effects of policy proposals is widely shared within these communities.

To change the status quo, opponents thus have to overcome an existing mobilization pattern. At the same time, they need to convince a highly expert policy community of the quality of their policy proposal. Attention is scarce and, the authors show, successful

reframing, that is, changing the dominant discourse with which a policy issue is discussed, seldom occurs.

The authors hypothesize that resources, political realities, and lobbyists' skills and strategies are important obstacles to changing policy frames (pp. 178–86). Given the rich empirical dataset the authors have constructed, it is a pity that they have not empirically tested these expectations. These findings could then have generated further insights into a major source of stability: the prevalence of information in expert policy communities. Shifting the analytical attention to stability would have added even more analytical leverage to the data than the authors have already provided.

Most of the predictors of policy change studied in this book happen to have either a moderate or no impact at all on policy change. Partisanship, for instance, does not seem to have a direct relation with policy change since changes are equally likely to occur in both partisan and non-partisan issues (p. 105). The resources that interest groups have at their disposal do not seem to result in preferred policy outcomes either (pp. 198–212). This does not mean that these predictors are not important, but that they cannot individually achieve policy change. Thus, the authors conclude, complex causation is an important explanation for the limited impact of each individual predictor (pp. 247–54). It is therefore a little surprising that the book does not include analyses of the interaction effects between the individual predictors of policy change. Examining the impact of multiple combinations of these individual predictors could have provided empirical insights into the interrelated causes of policy change. The conclusions the authors draw about interdependence and complexity of policy change would then have been more substantiated.

Lobbying and Policy Change adopts an innovative issue-centred research design, which ensures that in-depth qualitative data underlie the quantitative analyses. The sampling procedure involves a threefold strategy. It begins with listing registered interest groups active in US federal government lobbying in 1996. It subsequently draws a random sample of these interest groups, which is weighted by the number of issues these groups are involved in. It then selects the most recent issues on which representatives of the interest groups have been working. The result is a random sample of issues in which active interest groups are involved. While the sampling procedure is an innovation for both interest group behaviour and policy-making studies, it does not fully address an important problem in studying mobilization bias: sampling only (very) active interest groups.

The legal requirement for interest groups ('with a minimum level of activity in lobbying federal government') to register (pp. 3 and 267–71) ensures that only active groups are included in the sample. It thus excludes interest groups that are barely or irregularly active. Put differently, the sample is biased towards interest groups with a certain level of lobbying activity. Such a bias has consequences for generalizing findings on the impact of interest groups on policy outcomes. Without a reliable census of the full population of interest groups, it is difficult to properly characterize the mobilization bias reflected in the status quo. Yet, sampling interest groups with fluctuating or low levels of activity is hard. Such groups are excluded by official registration requirements and are difficult to detect otherwise. This is even more the case in countries with no official registration requirements for interest groups. Nonetheless, the issue-centred sampling method is a helpful step in approaching a representative sample of interest groups. In addition, the authors leave ample opportunities for other scholars to solve this problem by building upon their methodological approach.

But these are minor quibbles. *Lobbying and Policy Change* is an outstanding book. It packs impressive theoretical and empirical scope. Most important, the methodological appendix the authors have provided genuinely allows other scholars to build upon and improve their work. Their open attitude towards sharing data and research strategies stimulates comparative and cumulative research, which is fundamental to theoretical progress.

The authors provide many valuable insights into the limited success of interest groups in changing policy in Washington. Given the rich empirical data and theoretical implications it offers, it should be of interest to both students of public policy-making and professionals engaged in or confronted with lobbying activities. Ironically, perhaps, *Lobbying and Policy Change* teaches lobbyists one of the most important strategies to thwart policy change: make sure to communicate your scepticism about everything your adversaries propose.

Caelesta Braun-Poppelaars
University of Antwerp