

[Note: This is the proposal that led to the publication of *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). The proposal dates from 1991.]

The Politics of Disequilibrium

Agendas and Advantage in American Politics

Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones
Department of Political Science
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843
(409) 845-2511

Overview

In 1955, Americans were convinced that “atoms for peace” would generate electricity so inexpensively that it would be “too cheap to meter.” Two decades later, after billions of dollars in government and private spending, they were just as firmly convinced that nuclear power was dangerous, risky, and somehow devious. In 1957, Department of Agriculture officials convinced others that they could eradicate the fire ant, and the government undertook aerial spraying programs covering virtually the entire South. Pesticides would put an end to a variety of diseases (including malaria) and pests (including the mosquito and the housefly). Two decades later, pesticides were linked in the public mind not with progress, but with cancer, danger, and toxic waste. In the 1980s, many Americans perceived smoking tobacco as unhealthy, dirty, and indicative of a working-class life-style. Tobacco companies introduced new brands primarily aimed at young women who like to attend tractor-pulls. Three decades before, smoking had been seen as glamorous.

This book is about how powerful economic interests, such as the nuclear, pesticides, and smoking industries, can be defeated. We show how economic interests get to be powerful by constructing institutional arrangements to support themselves. With the help of government officials who share their interests, and during times of public enthusiasm with new technologies or public concern with a given problem, vested interests have a field day in American politics. Sub-governments, iron-triangles, and other favorable institutional arrangements are created, strengthened, and maintained for decades in all areas of American politics. Then they die. Even the most powerful ones sometimes lose their strength, as public understandings of the underlying problems change, as government institutions change their jurisdictions, and as opponents seek out new ways of challenging them.

We develop a model of the policymaking process that focuses on how institutional arrangements and public understandings of policy issues change over time. We note that change tends to come in two ways. For long periods of time, it can be slow, incremental, and conservative. This has led numerous observers of American politics to argue that our system is marked by equilibrium: each mobilization of one political interest leads to a countermobilization of the other side. Such a

view is not only conservative, but it is misleading. Many changes have swept through the American political system in anything but incremental fashion. The American political system encourages rapid change during short bursts of activity as well as incrementalism at other times.

This book is based on the study of eight public issues over the twentieth century. These issues are civilian nuclear power, pesticides, urban affairs, tobacco and smoking, auto safety, air transportation, drug and alcohol abuse, and child abuse. In order to isolate changes in levels of attention to these issues, and to associate these changes with subsequent changes in public policy outcomes, we have collected extensive data on these policies from a wide variety of sources.

The empirical component of this project involved extensive examination and coding of *The Readers' Guide*, *The New York Times*, *The Congressional Information Service*, *The Encyclopedia of Associations*, stock indices, regulatory data, and “reality checks”—data from a variety of sources on the nature of the social or economic problem the policy is supposed to redress. Despite this large effort in data collection, data analysis is simple, based on non-technical presentation of longitudinal trends. While not a text, we expect that the book would be adaptable in many courses in American politics and public policy, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Following are short descriptions of each chapter.

Part I: Policy Agendas and Disequilibrium Politics

The three chapters in this section provide an overview of the basic ideas, including the theses that issue politics is fundamentally unstable; that seemingly impregnable policy subsystems are subject to violent change; and that only a longitudinal, comparative issues approach is appropriate for studying stability and change in policy issues in America.

Chapter 1: Politics without Equilibrium

This chapter presents the argument that issue politics is unstable. It shows how positive feedback can work for brief periods of time, but can affect policy outcomes for decades. (Approx. 25 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 2: Policy Agendas and Issue Definition

In this chapter, we explore the relative roles of issue definition and political institutions in producing issue instability in American politics, and develop the thesis that policy subsystems are inherently unstable. We discuss how the definition of issues, which is reflected in the media and elsewhere, is critical in determining how decision-makers approach a policy problem. This chapter also provides the framework for the remainder of the book. (Approx 25 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 3: The Study of Policy Agendas

This chapter examines the two basic approaches to the study of policy agendas: cross-sectional typologies and longitudinal case studies. We present our approach to studying agendas, comparative issue dynamics, which combines the two by studying several issues longitudinally and quantitatively. (Approx. 25 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Part II: Issue Dynamics

The five chapters in this section develop the major themes empirically by showing in concrete cases the changes in public policy conceptions and outcomes over a 50- to 80-year period.

Chapter 4: The Construction and Collapse of a Policy Monopoly: Nuclear Power in America

This chapter presents the full analysis of one issue: civilian nuclear power, showing the sources of policy instability and the role of issue definition and political institutions in producing policy instability. Historical analysis illustrates the fragility of a supposedly unassailable policy subsystem. (Approx. 25 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 5: Two Models of Issue Expansion

Chapter Five develops and illustrates two basic models of issue expansion, one of which centers on a “wave of enthusiasm”, the second of which is a result of a “wave of criticism.” Illustrations are drawn from nuclear power, tobacco, and pesticides policy. (Approx. 20 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 6: The Reflection of Issue Definition in the Media

In this chapter we use information from our data on media coverage of several policy issues to document the thesis that every policy generates contending images, but that public attention tends to focus on only one of these images at a time. Over time, however, the image or side of the issue that dominates public discussion may change. When public understandings change, so often do public policies. (Approx. 30 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 7: Macropolitics and Issue Definition: The Rise and Fall of a National Urban Agenda

Here we look at the “window of opportunity” that brought urban affairs to the national policy agenda in the early 1960s. Then we analyze the forces that pushed cities from the national agenda. We show how partisan politics and issue definition determined policy outcomes. (Approx. 25 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 8: Politics without Opponents

In some issues, images have been negative for a long period of time. In the areas of drug abuse and child abuse, there are no politically legitimate defenders of the activity. Still, public policies to deal with the problem can range from education and treatment to criminalization. So public policies hinge on changing public understandings and on opportunistic mobilizations in which opponents to policy actions cannot raise competing images. (Approx. 20 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Part III: Institutions and the Dynamics of Systems

This section of three chapters shows how the changing structure of political institutions has affected the processing of political issues over time. We develop two ideas. First, we show that the different policy arenas, or venues, can be receptive to different definitions of policy issues at the same time. Second, we examine secular changes in the structure and operation of political institutions and show how these have altered the policy process over time.

Chapter 9: Interest Groups

This chapter shows how the mobilization of interests in American politics has changed over the years. It focuses in particular on the growth of the environmental and consumers’ movements during the 1960s and 1970s, and on the growth of business and profit-sector groups during the 1930s and 1940s. It discusses the implications of these changes in mobilization of bias for issue definition and policymaking. (Approx. 20 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 10: Congress

Congress has always occupied a central place in the study of policy agendas. We analyze here the important role of Congress in creating and in destroying policy subsystems. We show the variety of venues within Congress available to those hoping to break apart a subsystem, and how this system has developed over time. (To be drafted.)

Chapter 11: Federalism

This chapter views the U.S. federal system as a complex of linked policy venues, separate from but affecting one another. We show how states and localities are, in general, more receptive to investment-type policies, and the federal government is more apt to pursue consumption-type policies. Over time the receptivity of the levels of government to these two general types of policies has changed. (Approx. 25 pages. Draft completed and available.)

Chapter 12: Conclusion

This concluding chapter ties the specific cases developed in Chapters 4 to 11 to the notions of issue instability introduced in Chapter 1, and to the more specific ideas of the interaction between issue definition and political institutions set out in Chapter 2. We discuss the implications of the issue instability we have demonstrated for pluralist democracies. (To be drafted.)

Appendices include various data sources, explanation of coding schemes used.

Comparable books

The most relevant comparable books are the general books on agenda setting: John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*; and Roger Cobb and Charles Elder, *Political Participation in America*. Two recent books on issue definition, which is a major theme in our manuscript, are Frank Baumgartner, *Conflict and Rhetoric in French Policymaking* and Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox and Political Reason*. Edward Carmines and James Stimson's *Issue Evolution* uses quantitative information to study the political consequences of changing definitions of the race issue. In addition, there are several books that use an agenda framework to study single cases, including Chris Bosso, *Pesticides and Politics* and Barbara Nelson, *Making an Issue of Child Abuse*. Finally, William Riker's *Liberalism Against Populism* argues against equilibria in politics; we show empirically how this works.