

Agenda Setting and the Politics of Information

A Discussion of Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones' *The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America*

The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America. By Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2015. 264p. \$85.00 cloth, \$27.50 paper.

In a number of important articles and books—most notably *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (1993), *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems* (2005)—Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones have pioneered a distinctive approach to the study of agenda setting that has shaped research in both the U.S. politics and comparative politics subfields. *The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America* further expands on the theme of the political determinants, and implications, of “the organization and prioritization of information.” And so we have invited a number of political scientists from a range of subfields to comment on the book and on the research agenda more generally.

Kuhika Gupta

doi:10.1017/S1537592716000281

Studying the policy process involves making assumptions about the influx and flow of information. For example, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), a prominent theory about policy change, includes assumptions about the way in which information influences policy learning and how scientific and technical information is incorporated into policy battles (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Weible and Sabatier 2009). Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) suggests that information overload, combined with cognitive limitations (like bounded rationality), leads to disproportionate information processing, which accounts for systematic overreaction and underreaction to policy issues as expected by the punctuated equilibrium model (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) posits that actors use information (i.e., “science”) to expand or maintain the scope of conflict surrounding an issue (Jones and McBeth

2010). Despite these assumptions, we know relatively little about how and why information is produced, and, more importantly, how it influences the policy process.

In *The Politics of Information*, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones begin to answer these questions by developing a theoretical framework that specifies how, when, and why governments search for information and how this search for information influences public policy. Building on previous work (*The Politics of Attention* 2005; and the Policy Agendas Project),¹ where the authors contend that information processing in government produces systematic patterns of stability and change in policy outcomes, this piece argues that a key to understanding information processing lies in the search for information. In an increasingly complex social and political environment, the government must simultaneously find problems and develop solutions to problems. Unfortunately, these tasks are best accomplished with divergent organizational forms. Problem discovery works best when a diverse group of people and organizations are involved in the search for problems (entropic search). Problem solving, on the other hand, works best when a centralized group of experts are involved in the search for solutions (expert search) (pp. 23–26). Though optimal in different situations, both types of search generate negative externalities. Unchecked entropic search, for instance, can

Kuhika Gupta (kuhikagupta@ou.edu) is a Research Scientist at the Center for Energy, Security and Society and the Center for Risk and Crisis Management at the University of Oklahoma.

lead to a “seek and ye shall find” dynamic, wherein the identification of new problems causes complexity and the growth of government (p. 112). Expert search, by comparison, leads to simplification and the omission of important facts, thereby generating misguided policies.

To demonstrate these points, Baumgartner and Jones trace the evolution of search mechanisms in the U.S. government from World War II to 2008. In so doing, they show that the entropic and expert search capacity of the government expanded between the 1950s and 1970s, leading to the well-documented growth of the government. This growth occurred through both the broadening of government activity (government enacted policies on new issues) and the thickening of policy action (government actions increased within existing issue arenas). As the 1970s waned, the pendulum shifted toward top-down models of problem discovery and censored models of expert search, both of which slowed the *growth* of government but limited the *capacity* of government to deal with complex problems.

The theoretical and empirical research presented in this work advances our understanding of how and why the U.S. government produces information, and how this information influences politics and policy. As such, scholars of American politics, public policy, and public administration will find it thought provoking and useful. One question that may arise: What caused the expansions and contractions of search that were empirically identified throughout the book? The authors suggest that these changes were caused by a complex mix of factors, such as executive preferences, organization within the legislature, the path-dependent nature of institutions, elections, and, more generally, environmental context. These suggestions imply that changes in search capacity are somewhat idiosyncratic and country specific. I wonder if this is the case: Is the U.S. experience specific to the United States? Or have other governments around the world experienced a similar trajectory? Have they, like the United States, gravitated toward simplification? Or have some governments opted for complexity? If so, what are the ramifications? I hope that Baumgartner, Jones, and their colleagues in the Comparative Agendas Project² tackle these questions with the same enthusiasm they have about the comparative applicability of PET (and the *Politics of Attention* 2005).

Although *The Politics of Information* focuses on the macropolitical forces that influence public policy, it offers insights into dynamics at the issue (or subsystem) level that require additional research. For instance, the authors posit that the growth and complexity of modern-day government stem not just from the expansion of search about existing issues (termed “thickening” of government activity) but also from the search for information about new issues that were previously outside the purview of government activity (termed “broadening” of government activity) (p. 162). When studying the evolution of search dynamics across

different issues, the authors find that information flows and search dynamics vary, sometimes substantially, across policy issues. To explain this variation, they show that issue subsystems that had been around for a long time witness different search dynamics and patterns of growth than newer issues that make their way onto the government agenda. Data on budgetary spending and government employment show that beginning in the 1950s through the 1970s, older, more mature subsystems (like Health and Transportation) tended to grow in thickness, whereas newer, more nascent subsystems (like Education and Justice) grew in breadth (pp. 142–49). Furthermore, the rate at which newer subsystems grew was faster than the rate of thickening for older subsystems. These distinctions may be a result of the urgency with which issues emerge on the agenda and the diverse flow of information associated with those issues. However, the authors do not include variables at the subsystem level that may cause these differences. This may provide yet another avenue of future research.

The most thought-provoking aspect of this research is the normative question it poses about the role of government in an increasingly complex world. When looking for information, should the government invest in entropic search, which results in complexity, redundancy, and inefficiencies, but is more representative of the complex problems we face? Or should the government continue to regulate the flow of information, leading to efficiency, speed, and “small government” but ignoring or neglecting the complex nature of the problems we face? At the end, Baumgartner and Jones come down on the side of organized anarchy—“vigorous information processing systems that are capable of detecting problems and prioritizing them for action” (p. 208).

Notes

- 1 For more information on the project, see <http://www.policyagendas.org/>.
- 2 For more on the Comparative Agendas Project and its efforts, see <http://www.comparativeagendas.info/>.

References

- Baumgartner, Frank and Bryan D. Jones. 1993. *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2005. *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jones, Michael D. and Mark K. McBeth. 2010. “A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?” *Policy Studies Journal* 38(2): 329–53.
- Sabatier, Paul A. and Hank Jenkins-Smith. 1993. *Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Weible, Christopher M. and Paul A. Sabatier. 2009. “Coalitions, Science, and Belief Change: Comparing Adversarial and Collaborative Policy Subsystems.” *Policy Studies Journal* 37(2): 195–212.

Kathleen Knight

doi:10.1017/S1537592716000293

This is the third and most refined of a series of books emerging from the monumental data-collection enterprise known as the Policy Agendas Project (<http://www.policyagendas.org>). The Policy Agendas Project and its companion Comparative Agendas Project have led to a substantial body of important work that goes far beyond the three books themselves. The topic of this particular effort is the conflict between complexity and control in information processing about public policy in the U.S. over the last six decades (1947–2008).

The Politics of Information is divided into three parts. The first—“seek and ye shall find”—lays out the basic nature of the problem: Complexity leads to greater information and search, then discovers more complexity and new problems. Baumgartner and Jones identify the *paradox of search* in greater detail in both Chapters 1 and 2, arguing that “[g]athering information about complex problems, prioritizing those problems, and understanding the myriad repercussions that current policies may have on different elements of society . . . require that we organize diversity into the process of gathering information. . . . But implementing solutions and doing so efficiently requires clarity of organizational design and a clear mission (pp. 6–7).

Chapter 3 formalizes this concept by distinguishing between “expert search” and “entropic search”—with the latter more critical for identifying and prioritizing problems. To measure *entropy*, the authors employ Shannon’s *H*, which is an index of the spread of objects across categories, initially developed as a measure of market concentration. In policy agenda terms, entropy is the spread of topics across a large number of different categories, such as a policy considered by a variety of congressional committees. The term “entropy” has much to recommend its usage for describing the general phenomenon, particularly in statistical terms, but it carries with it some negative implications. It might have been useful for the authors to take another step in borrowing from psychology the general idea of the dispositional system versus the surveillance system in information processing. Dispositional search would correspond easily to expert search, while the term “surveillance” might seem less wasteful than entropic search.

The second part of the book deals with the corollary problem that “search implies that if a problem is found the probability of government action will increase” (p. 11). Thus, diversity in search inevitably leads to larger government, “[m]ore often than not” (p. 11). This is the heart of the book, and it is approached with an appealing mixture

of history and data analysis. The descriptive history of the rise and fall of institutional information processing in the executive and legislative branches is entertaining for those of us who remember when President Ronald Reagan took Office of Management and Budget Director David Stockman “to the woodshed” for contradicting the “rosy scenario,” and crucial grounding for those who do not. The data (for example, Figure 4.2—GAO Reports by Time; p. 77) trace an arc in the production of information, with its peak in approximately 1978. Limitations on information production suggest limitations on government.

Chapter 5 addresses the nature of entropy as it relates to Congress over time. The authors note that the fact that the number of congressional committees has remained relatively stable since the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, while the range of issues considered has grown broader, must lead to greater complexity in congressional jurisdiction over time. Using measures of both committee entropy and topic entropy (and a combined index of the two), they find three phases. The first (postwar years) has a period of stability, followed by a massive increase in entropy in the second phase, from the late 1950s to the mid 1970s, which saw a dramatic rise in attention to new issues, coupled with a corresponding decrease in jurisdictional clarity. The third phase witnesses a temporary drop in entropy corresponding to the Gingrich centralization of the committee structure, followed by a return to the previous highs, but no further increase in entropy since the late 1970s. Thus, the historical expansion of information and complexity can under some circumstances be contained, and even reversed in the short run. The fundamental reason for such reversal is approached in earlier chapters and amounts to censorship of information—generally by defining some aspects of the problem as irrelevant to committee inquiry, or outside the range of congressional action.

Chapter 6 illustrates the growth of information and the growth of government activities in response to the “Great New-Issue Expansion” of the late 1950s to the mid-1970s period. This expansion is facilitated by the growth in information-processing capabilities of the executive and legislative branches, the increasing activity of interest groups, and the discovery or redefinition of problems that are thought to be within the government’s scope to solve. Baumgartner and Jones put the latter very effectively as “the translation of ‘conditions’ into ‘problems’” (p. 121). This results in the “thickening” of government as needs to “fix” existing areas of government policy emerge from oversight and entropic search, and the “broadening” of government as new issues are prioritized on the agenda. Chapter 7 extends the examination of new-issue expansion to identify an arc with its peak in 1981–83. However, as some measures indicated contraction, others suggested increasing complexity, for example, more hearings on subtopics per bill. They

Kathleen Knight (kathleenknight48@gmail.com) is Senior Lecturer in Political Science at Columbia University.

ultimately find that broadening—expansion of new issues—dominates over thickening with new issues, for example, taking part of the budget share of traditional ones. The dynamic of this “broadening” is best explained by leaders responding to shifting social problems.

The authors suggest that this expansion of new issues set the stage for a conservative backlash expressed in elections, legislative behavior and interest-group activity, all involving the treatment of information. Further, they suggest that such changes interacted with each other dynamically to produce changes in the institutions, as well as acting upon issues. They also note early-on President Reagan’s disregard for policy analysis and, perhaps, facts more generally. This perspective also apparently became more prevalent in Congress. They find that one way that did seem to slow government expansion was to cut down on the flow of information bringing along with it the problems of *error accumulation* and *punctuated equilibrium* described in their previous work, *Agendas and Instability* (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

In Part III, the authors return to the general implications of information in government, stating bluntly, “Control the flow of information and you can control the growth of government” (p. 183). At the same time, they note that government growth accelerated during the George W. Bush era without increase in entropic information search. They attribute this to carefully controlled and concentrated search within selected areas, such as domestic security, defense, and education. Carefully controlled policy search inevitably excludes the more diverse entropic search necessary to successfully handle complex problems. Perhaps the policy disasters of the Bush administration, from 9/11 through Hurricane Katrina to the meltdown of the economic system, bear witness to the lack of entropic search. The two phases of the Iraq War parallel the difference between clearly defined goals (get Saddam), and the complexity of the post-Saddam period also illustrates the paradox of search.

In their conclusion, Baumgartner and Jones emphasize information and its censorship, identifying several examples of denial of information—even information that is available and easy to collect. They acknowledge that leadership decisions restricting the flow of information to government may be tempting in the short run. Yet they argue the complexity of current problems requires diverse viewpoints, redundancy in observations, and the ability to tolerate ambiguity. This is better achieved with an understanding that governments are “complex adaptive systems evolving in concert with even more complex environments” (p. 208).

References

- Baumgartner, Frank R. and Bryan D. Jones. 1993.
Agendas and Instability in American Politics. Chicago:
University of Chicago Press.

Eric Patashnik

doi:10.1017/S153759271600030X

How should political scientists assess government performance? One common benchmark is democratic accountability. Scholars evaluate the outcomes of the policy process by examining the correspondence between what governments do and what citizens say they want (Gilens 2012). A second approach is problem-solving. The question is whether government can respond to an evolving flow of societal challenges like poverty and climate change (Adler and Wilkerson 2012). Over the past three decades, Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones have made seminal contributions to the problem-solving perspective. Their research, grounded in their remarkable Policy Agendas database on government activity—a tremendous contribution to collective scholarship—has spawned a large number of studies of policy stability and change and rendered concepts like “policy punctuation” staples of the literature.

In their excellent book, *The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America*, Baumgartner and Jones turn to the critical role of information in the detection and prioritization of problems. Information is defined broadly to refer not merely to statistical evidence, but also to qualitative information, beliefs that motivate professionals and indicators of constituent opinion. Information may relate to the existence and severity of problems or to the cost and feasibility of solutions. The book is a typical Baumgartner and Jones product: theoretically-engaging, deeply-researched, rich in insight. It encompasses a wide range of topics, from the rise and decline of policy analysis in the federal government, to changes in the jurisdictional structure of the congressional committee system, to the expansion and contraction of the issue agenda. Students of American politics, public policy, and public administration will all find much food for thought here. While every page is illuminating, the book does not resolve every important question about the use of information in American policymaking that could be posed. The book touches upon three fascinating issues that deserve to receive deeper attention: the barriers to evidence-based policymaking, the influence of partisan competition on the search process, and the politics of information suppression. By probing how institutions, polarization, and vested interests mediate the politics of problem-solving, the next generation of research can examine how information not only shapes cognitive processes, but also reflects and refracts power relations.

Eric M. Patashnik (ericpat@virginia.edu) is Professor of Public Policy and Politics and Director of the Center for Health Policy at the University of Virginia.

Baumgartner and Jones make three nice moves in the book. First, they distinguish between expert information and entropic information (“information as diversity”), each of which is applicable to different stages of the decision-making process. Expert information helps officials (1) determine whether particular solutions fit problems, and (2) break apart problems to understand their component parts. Entropic information—the perspectives generated by the diversity of actors in society—helps leaders determine which of the many potential problems facing the country warrant attention. Second, Baumgartner and Jones differentiate between “engineering” problems like providing clean water (which are well understood and have known solutions) and “complex” problems like poverty (where policymakers may not even understand the nature of the problem, much less know of an effective solution). Finally, the authors distinguish between the growth of government as “thickening” (when government adds new elements to existing programs) and as “broadening” (when government takes on new tasks).

Of course, the messy real world of U.S. policymaking does not admit of such clean dichotomies. Expertise (such as microeconomic research on the magnitude of the deadweight losses associated with a market failure, a good proxy for the amount of harm a problem is causing society) is useful not only for problem detection, but also for priority setting. And the distinction between “complex” and “engineering” problems frequently reflects political considerations as much as underlying differences in knowledge and information. (Many experts would argue that climate change—seemingly a “complex” problem—has well-understood solutions, such as imposing a tax on carbon and using transfer payments or cuts in other taxes to mitigate the distributional effects). Nonetheless, these distinctions generate real insight. The analysis of the broadening and thickening dimensions of government growth—which is supported by a review of empirical trends in government activity—is particularly fresh and illuminating.

While *The Politics of Information* is not a polemic, it packs a punch. The core argument is that there is a tradeoff between too little and too much information in government. The better the performance of the government’s information-processing mechanisms, the greater the diversity of views government absorbs, the more likely public policy problems will be detected. Yet the more problems are discovered, the more government programs expand—and the more difficulty administrators will have implementing solutions. Too little information allows problems to fester, but too much may generate cognitive overload. Policymakers thus need to manage the tension between the benefits of information and the benefits of clarity and control. Baumgartner and Jones call this tension the *paradox of search*. How this tension plays out is shown to vary over time. Between the late 1950s and the

late 1970s, the capacity of American national government to detect problems expanded. Congressional committees became more active and the policy analysis capability of government was bolstered. As these search processes improved, government became more likely to enact new programs. Since the 1980s, the general growth in the size of government and the strengthening of the government's information-processing mechanisms have stagnated or reserved.

For the most part, Baumgartner and Jones investigate macropolitical trends, yet they recognize that developments at the micro and meso levels also require examination: "By taking on such a broad set of observations, the patterns we observe as well as the explanations we develop for them will be very general. It will fall to us in other projects and to others in the future to delve into some of these arguments in greater detail, exploring how they manifest themselves in detail during the day-to-day or year-to-year functioning of individual policy domains, agencies, and policy communities, and to understanding the role of individual leaders in pushing the system in this or that direction" (p. xi). I would nominate three topics for additional study.

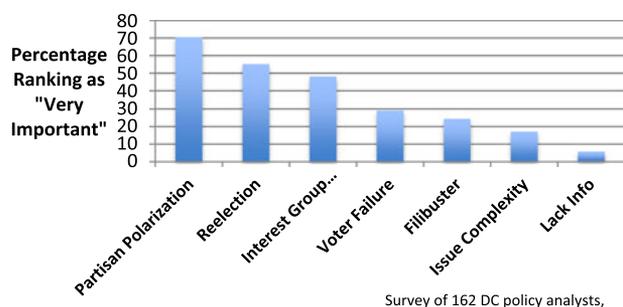
First, scholars should probe the conditions under which different actors will not just receive good information, but actually *use* it. Justin Peck and I surveyed more than 150 Washington-based professional policy analysts about the performance of Congress. Overwhelmingly—and consistent with Baumgartner and Jones's central finding—these experts told us that Congress is awash in information. Asked what factors impede congressional performance, only six percent of survey respondents said that lack of information is a very important reason for Congress's failure as a problem-solving institution. Experts were far more likely to point to partisan polarization (71%), lawmakers focused on their own reelections (55%), and interest group pressure (48%) as reasons for Congress's poor performance (Figure 1).

Yet this does not mean—and Baumgartner and Jones certainly do not suggest otherwise—that Congress always

acts on information or even that it weighs higher-quality or more systematic information more heavily than lower-quality or more impressionistic information. 65 percent of the policy analysts in our survey said that Congress has done a poor job over the past ten years in making policy decisions on the basis of objective evidence. To make our inquiry more concrete, we asked the policy analysts to reflect on the following scenario: What if a prestigious academic journal published a research study showing that a federal transportation program is highly cost-ineffective, meaning that it would be possible to achieve the same transportation benefits at much lower cost, or to spend the same amount of money while generating much larger transportation benefits. How likely is it that the chairs of the congressional committees with jurisdiction over the program would become aware of the study? About half of the experts (46%) were very or somewhat confident that committee chairs would indeed become aware the study. Just 4 percent of experts were very or somewhat confident that Congress would makes a serious attempt to replace the transportation program with a more cost-effective approach, however. While we did not pose a follow-up question as to why respondents believed that Congress would fail to act on the information, we suspect the most likely answer is that powerful interests groups have a stake in the preservation of existing policy arrangements (see Moe 2015), which Congress would be reluctant to upset.

A second topic for study is whether problem search is partisan. One strategy available to Republicans who are opposed to government growth is to gum up the search process; as the authors write, "if government does not search for problems, it cannot propose government solutions to them" (p. 171). In tracing the rise and decline of the federal government's search mechanisms since the 1980s, Baumgartner and Jones note that Ronald Reagan's ideological presidency weakened the bipartisan commitment to systematic analysis in the executive branch. In the mid 1990s, the new Republican congressional majority under Speaker Newt Gingrich took steps (including the elimination of the Office of Technology Assessment) to scale back policy analysis capability in Congress. Yet it would be too blunt to say that facilitating (constraining) the overall search process is only of interest to Democrats (Republicans). The authors note that some conservative Republicans have called for rebuilding the capacity for policy analysis in the legislative branch, recognizing that it is impossible to identify government waste without good information about how programs are working. And Democrats have now always welcomed better information about foreign threats or the costs of regulation on business. Conflicts over whether an agency, congressional committee, or government agency should conduct a study or release a report are rooted not only in sincere disagreement over the proper role of the state, but also in the strategic competition for power. As Frances E. Lee observes,

Figure 1
Factors Impeding Congressional Performance



Source: Patashnik and Peck (2016).

legislators are well aware that “information is a powerful weapon” (2009, p. 121). Information can favor one side or the other in a partisan debate and influence media narratives and policy agendas. Hence congressional votes on the release of information tend to be either non-controversial (when party interests are not at stake) or highly contentious on partisan lines (Lee 2009).

A final issue concerns the politics of information suppression. Good information can expose the weaknesses of politicians’ positions and activate diffuse interests, but for this very reason, information is not neutral. The powerful economic actors who benefit from the status quo can use their political resources (campaign money, prestige, connections to officeholders) to deny or distort information that threatens their interests. Baumgartner and Jones recognize this possibility, but they argue that it is “unlikely that the system is that crass” (p. 196). I am less sanguine. To be sure, there are limits on the extent to which actors can censor information. For example, during the 1970s, the airline industry (which at the time was sheltered from free market competition) was powerless to stop the dissemination of microeconomic research showing that consumers were paying higher prices than they would under a deregulated system (Derthick and Quirk 1985). The central finding from Baumgartner and Jones’s overall body of work is that policy subsystems are often more vulnerable to change than they appear. Yet the scope and durability of this change is bounded (Patashnik 2008), and powerful organizational actors may have the capacity to constrain the generation and use of information harmful to their interests.

My current research on efforts to promote evidence-based medicine as a way to improve healthcare quality and curb wasteful spending, for example, shows that medical societies and drug companies frequently seek to discredit peer-reviewed medical studies that challenge the efficacy of profitable treatments. These actors actively lobby the federal government to prevent Medicare officials from incorporating this information in their coverage and payment decisions (Gerber and Patashnik 2006; Gerber, Patashnik and Dowling, n.d.). To be sure, the need for objective information about the relative benefits, costs and risks of treatment alternatives—a public good that the market will not supply at the socially optimal level—has not gone unrecognized. The Agency for Health Care Policy and Research was created in 1989 to coordinate such health services research. But after the agency issued a report concluding that there was no evidence to support the routine use of spinal-fusion surgery, strong opposition from back surgeons led Congress to slash the agency’s funding and curb its authority. The Affordable Care Act tries to fill this information gap by creating a new independent, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization (the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute) to investigate what really works in health care, but as a result

of special interest group lobbying and public fears of “rationing,” Congress rejected the use of cost-effectiveness analysis to aid Medicare coverage and reimbursement decisions (Gerber and Patashnik 2011). In sum, information is central not just to learning and discovery but also to the exercise of political power (Pierson 1994).

References

- Adler, E. Scott and John D. Wilkerson. 2012. *Congress and the politics of problem solving*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Detrick, Martha and Paul J. Quirk, 1985. *The Politics of Deregulation*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Gerber, Alan S. and Eric M. Patashnik, editors. (2006). *Promoting the general welfare: new perspectives on government performance*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- . (2011). “The Politicization of Evidence-Based Medicine: The Limits of Pragmatic Problem Solving in an Era of Polarization.” *California Journal of Politics and Policy*, 3(4).
- Gerber, Alan S., Eric M. Patashnik, and Conor M. Dowling. *Unhealthy Politics: The Battle over Evidence-Based Medicine in the United States*, book manuscript, n.d.
- Gilens, Martin. 2012. *Affluence and influence: Economic inequality and political power in America*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Lee, Frances E. 2009. *Beyond Ideology: Politics, Principles, and Partisanship in the U.S. Senate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Moe, Terry M. 2015. “Vested Interests and Political Institutions.” *Political Science Quarterly*, 130(2).
- Patashnik, Eric M. 2008. *Reforms at Risk: What Happens After Major Policy Changes Are Enacted*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Patashnik, Eric M. and Justin Peck. 2016. “Can Congress Perform Policy Analysis? The Politics of Problem Solving on Capitol Hill,” in Alan Gerber and Eric Schickler, eds., *Governing in a Polarized Age: Elections, Parties, and Political Representation in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.
- Pierson, Paul. 1994. *Dismantling the welfare state?: Reagan, Thatcher and the politics of retrenchment*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Scott E. Robinson

doi:10.1017/S1537592716000311

Over more than two decades, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones have built a remarkably successful model of policymaking grounded in punctuated attention to public problems and the imperfect inertia of public institutions. This record of scholarship stands as a sterling example of the potential for carefully crafted, cumulative building of a theory of the policymaking system. In *The Politics of Information*, the authors return to the roots of agenda setting while connecting questions of policymaking to key issues in congressional politics. In this review, I briefly summarize the contribution of this new book to its tradition of policy process research. The next section discusses the limitations of the approach in the book, with special attention to areas where the research tradition leaves important questions. Finally, the last section argues that the policymaking model used here could benefit from closer engagement with recent scholarship in public management and public administration.

Baumgartner and Jones build on their previous work on the allocation of attention to policy issues in order to shift the discussion to the organization of information in the U.S. policy system. They illustrate the important linkages between the systems through which the U.S. Congress detects and defines policy problems and the growth of government activity as a whole. The complexity of policy problems makes these processes of definition essential—but inherently limiting. All such definitions prioritize some dimensions or qualities of problems over others. The result can be ignored dimensions unless the policy system increases its capacity to recognize and analyze ever more complex dimensions of public problems. The first half of the book traces the development of this process as the U.S. Congress experienced the Great New Issue Expansion (pp. 120–22). The period of the late 1950s to the early 1970s saw a dramatic expansion of the U.S. federal policy system to involve new issues. Baumgartner and Jones characterize this expansion as a broadening of the policy agenda, which ushered in an age of new policy institutions to manage these new issues. They finally distinguish the organizational implications of this broadening of the agenda from the thickening of the policy system—that is, increasing activity on preexisting policy problems.

While an excellent contribution to our understanding of problem definition and the policy process generally, the book is limited in two key respects. First, the discussion of problem definition uses a sometimes sterile, decontextualized account of the nature of the problem it

discusses. As is common in the literature on congressional organization and decision making, problems are said to have separable dimensions around which the system organizes activity. The diversity of dimensions leads to general strategies like venue shopping and expansion of conflict. However, the generality of these activities limits the discussion of the content and nature of the problem-definition activities. For example, the consideration of hydraulic fracturing as an energy issue or an environmental issue has implications beyond the limits of these two frames. The substance of the dimensions is an essential part of the process. While the informational approach to problem definition provides potential tools for understanding the shifts through these different dimensions of fracking, the discussion typically avoids this sort of specific context.

The limited discussion of the content of the issue dimensions makes it more difficult to engage fundamental issues of power. The debate over problem definition has tremendous importance when the operation of power in a political system is considered. Ignoring or deemphasizing the substantive nature of the expanding, shrinking, or competing dimensions of problem definition risks concealing how these processes serve as a significant instrument of power. Again, the example of fracking serves as a useful illustration. The dynamics of the dimensionality of the debate over fracking reveal operations of power. If the expansion of dimension adds potentially disrupting actors—such as the inclusion of transportation safety regulators—you have a substantive change in the politics of fracking that has a broader effect than is represented as a simple expansion of the scope of conflict or audience. There is nothing inherent in the authors' information approach to problem definition that prevents the engagement of these aspects of problem definitions and their dimensionality. I hope that future work will take the connections among problem definition, power, and substantive connections between the dimensions of the policy definition more seriously.

The coverage of the informational process of policymaking has a second gap. Baumgartner and Jones discuss the role of administrative agencies in the information-centered policy system (pp. 141–42). They note that these organizations are significant producers of knowledge that serve as inputs into the policy system. However, it would also be interesting to consider the implications of previous iterations of institution building that created these information-providing administrative agencies that generate the inputs for future rounds of the policy system. In an informational sense, the institutions built during the broadening of the policy system serve to reinforce particular problem definitions moving forward. This may create an incremental tendency to the informational process.

The authors' informational theory of policymaking also offers important insight for the study of the administrative

Scott E. Robinson (scott.e.robinson@ou.edu) is the Bellmon Chair of Public Service at the University of Oklahoma.

agencies. From a public management perspective, the operation of problem definition and the organization of policymaking along the lines of these dimensions have tremendous significance for the actors who must implement these policies. Scholars of administrative agencies can find within this book an important perspective on policymaking that can contribute to greater understanding of key public management topics, such as the use of discretion in the implementation of policy, the design of regulation, and the organization of policy regimes to carry out the policies created by this information-focused system.

The Politics of Information may well serve as an important juncture in the development of Baumgartner and Jones' theory of the policy process. The theoretical framework and extensive data have reached a point where the theory can return to address fundamental questions of power in a democracy or how the treatment of policies in the legislative process creates constraints on policy implementation. This stands as the most important contribution to their theoretical tradition in over a decade, and an essential read for anyone following the scholarship on the public policy process.

A Discussion of Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones' The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America. Article in Perspectives on Politics 14(02):502-504 Â· June 2016 with 2 Reads. How we measure 'reads'.Â In a number of important articles and booksâ€”most notably Agendas and Instability in American Politics (1993) , The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems (2005)â€”Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones have pioneered a distinctive approach to the study of agenda setting that has shaped research in both the U.S. politics and comparative politics subfields.