

Public Pressure Campaigns and Bureaucratic Policymaking

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Motivation

Leading models of influence in bureaucratic policymaking focus on two key political forces: sophisticated interest group lobbying and political oversight. As bureaucrats learn about policy problems and balance interest-group demands, public comment processes allow lobbying organizations to provide useful technical information and inform decisionmakers of their preferences on draft policies. Agencies may then update policy positions within constraints imposed by their political principals.

While this may describe most cases of bureaucratic policymaking, these models do not explain or account for the contentious politics that occasionally inspire millions of ordinary people to respond to calls for public input on draft agency policies. Mass engagement in bureaucratic policymaking has thus largely been ignored by political scientists, leaving a weak empirical base for normative and prescriptive work. Like other forms of mass political participation, such as protests and letter writing campaigns, mass public comments on draft agency rules provide no new technical information. Nor do they wield any formal authority to reward or sanction bureaucrats, as comments from a Members of Congress might. The number on each side, be it ten or ten million, has no legal import for an agency's response.

How, if at all, should scholars incorporate mass engagement into models of bureaucratic policymaking?