
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones

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twentieth century Mary Parker Follett recommended condominium government between the president and the speaker. Could it have happened with Bill Clinton in the White House and Jim Wright in the speakership? We shall never know.

Ronald M. Peters, Jr., *University of Oklahoma*

Agendas and Instability in American Politics. By Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Pp. 298. \$47.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones have written a very important book about the impact of agendas on policy stability and change in American politics. *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* combines broad theory building with a detailed analysis of several cases.

Baumgartner and Jones raise the question: How can we theoretically account for both the long periods of stability that mark American politics, as well as the shorter but dramatic bursts of policy change? They develop the notion of punctuated equilibrium to explain both stability and change. The foundation for the punctuated equilibrium idea comes from three different literatures: social choice theory, policy agendas, policy subsystems.

From social choice theory, Baumgartner and Jones borrow the idea that there is no equilibrium in American politics. Instead, they distinguish between stability and equilibrium, and argue that institutions provide a framework that can promote stability. The second literature, that of policy subsystems, helps them explain stability. They view policy subsystems as a type of institutional arrangement that can promote stability. As long as the subsystem can insulate itself from new policy ideas and policy competitors, it can provide a stable arrangement to the members of the subsystem. Instability and change occur when forces outside of the subsystem mobilize and challenge the existing subsystem. Lastly, from the agenda-setting literature, Baumgartner and Jones note the importance of ideas. New ideas may successfully invade a subsystem, leading to dramatic policy change, as the existing subsystem is destroyed and replaced with a new subsystem. These new ideas tend not to refute the old ideas that animated the subsystem. Rather, they offer a new way of looking at a problem, raise a new problem, or redefine the dimension of conflict associated with a problem.

This summary grossly simplifies their imaginative theory. Their theory is full of new ways of looking at politics and policymaking. It integrates several disparate literatures, and, along the way, offers many useful insights. I highlight just a few of these here. They place the notions of incremental and nonincremental change within the framework of punctuated equilibrium. Incremental change occurs from negative feedback, while positive feedback leads to nonincremental change. Negative feedback is essentially criticism of the status quo but within the terms of debate that the status quo established. Minor adjustments are made to reconcile the

criticism with the established way of doing things. In contrast, new ideas are critical in stimulating positive feedback loops. New ideas serve as shocks that alter the terms of debate and may redirect the policymaking process along a new course.

Baumgartner and Jones also address a debate between two styles of mobilization, which they call Schattschneiderian and Downsian. The former mobilization occurs from opposition to existing subsystems, and, if successful, leads to the destruction of old subsystems; new subsystems emerge to replace the old. Downsian mobilization occurs without a preexisting subsystem in place. Rather a wave of enthusiasm leads to the creation of a wholly new subsystem. This new subsystem institutionalizes the political impulses and enthusiasms that led to the Downsian type of mobilization. Countering Down's attention to cycle theory, the emergent subsystem implements policies in accord with the desires of those who were mobilized long after the attentions of the once mobilized have shifted to other concerns.

Not only is their book theoretically well developed, it is also highly empirical. Baumgartner and Jones have collected a wealth of data on several policy areas, including nuclear power, smoking and tobacco, pesticides, automobile safety, urban affairs, child abuse, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and federalism. Most of their data are used to assess the degree of attentiveness of the media and political decision makers (especially Congress) to the issues under consideration. Consistent with their notion of punctuated equilibrium, they find long periods of time when a policy area attracts little attention, but occasional huge spikes in attentiveness that are associated with dramatic policy change. They also illustrate the impact of institutional and subsystem arrangements, as these policy making frameworks maintain governmental attentiveness to the policy after media attention has evaporated.

Like all good research, this book raises some unanswered questions. Each case that Baumgartner and Jones present illustrates the process of mobilization leading to policy change. What Baumgartner and Jones do not tell us is how common such processes are. Two other possibilities exist. Mobilization may not lead to policy change and policy change may happen without mobilization. The first process leads to the question: under what conditions will mobilization result in policy change and under what conditions will the status quo remain intact? The second process raises the question: how often and under what conditions do we get policy change without mobilization? In their work on agenda setting, Cobb, Ross, and Ross propose three models of agenda building: the outsider initiative model, the mobilization model, and the inside initiative model. How often does the insider initiative model, in which elites do not try to expand their support to the mass public but restrict policy making to government (and other strategic) elites, result in major policy change?

I have one minor quibble with the Baumgartner and Jones book. Although they illustrate their theory with a range of cases, there seems to be little rationale for the selection of cases. They critique cross-sectional typologies of policies quite strongly, but their theory building might have been even more satisfying had they tried to incorporate some of those typologies (e.g., Lowi's redistributive, distributive,

regulatory, or J. Q. Wilson's distribution of benefits and costs) explicitly into their design. They might have noted important differences in mobilization processes and/or outcomes across different policies. Or, just as theoretically compelling, they might not have found any differences. Future research could profit by pursuing this line of investigation.

These comments should not be taken as harsh criticisms. Indeed, Baumgartner and Jones's powerful and rich theory stimulated the questions that I have raised. This is another mark of the quality and importance of their work. It will clearly become a landmark study of public policy making and American politics and will inspire others to follow up from the foundation that they provide.

Jeffrey E. Cohen, *University of Kansas*

State Government and Economic Performance. By Paul Brace. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Pp. xv, 152. \$28.95.)

This book demonstrates that the effectiveness of state economic development policies must be evaluated against the backdrop of national economic trends. This sensible and plausible perspective has rarely influenced studies of state economic development. As a result, proponents of laissez-faire strategies of weak government, low taxes, and minimal spending will be disconcerted by Brace's finding that they are not only ineffective, but leave states vulnerable during periods of national economic distress. On the other hand, advocates of neocorporatist policy activism will be discomforted by Brace's documentation of the limits of state efforts to buck powerful national economic trends.

Chapter 1 and chapter 2 introduce us to economic theories of development and the history of state efforts to manage their economies. Chapter 3 and chapter 4 present case histories of the economic development policies of four states—Arizona and Texas as examples of limited intervention strategies, and Michigan and New York as models of state activism. These cases anchor interpretations of econometric findings on 48 states from the mid-1960s through the late-1990s that constitute the core of the book. In chapter 5, variations in changes in state per capita personal income, nonagricultural employment, and value added by manufacturing are disaggregated as arising from either national economic trends or from factors endogenous to the states. Both temporal and spatial patterns are found; some states are more dependent upon national trends than others, and the influence of these trends fluctuates over time. Chapter 6 then employs a pooled design to assess the impacts of state institutional capacity, economic development incentives, tax and spending levels, party competition, and a number of controls on the three dependent measures of economic growth.

Brace concludes that activist governments and their typical array of development policies—strong political institutions, a broad mix of economic incentives, and high levels of investment expenditures—can promote economic growth under