

Agendas and Instability in American Politics

In *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, Frank Baumgartner a Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science at Pennsylvania State University and Bryan Jones examine a variety of policy areas using a longitudinal approach focusing on publicly available records, in particular media coverage of policy debates, that reveals that "...our government can best be understood as a series of institutionally enforced stabilities, periodically punctuated by dramatic change." (p. 251) Their approach to the study of issues they term, comparative issues dynamics, because they study a number of issues quantitatively over a relatively long time span.

Fundamental Messages

Baumgartner and Jones propose a punctuated equilibrium model of policy change in American politics, based on the emergence and the recession of policy issues from the public agenda. They argue that much of the political world is never at equilibrium, but that points of stability are created and destroyed at critical junctures throughout the process of issue development. Often, when issues emerge, new institutional structures are created that remain in place for decades, structuring participation and creating the illusion of equilibrium. Later agenda access can destroy these institutions and replace them with others. The definition of issues is central to these political processes in disequilibrium. Through examining policy areas, including nuclear war, pesticides, smoking, auto safety, urban affairs, drug abuse and child abuse Baumgartner and Jones illustrate the value of the punctuated equilibrium model. Policies across the range of American Politics have been affected by the dramatic changes that the social and political institutions that structure participation on the policymaking process in American Politics have themselves undergone and still do go through at certain periods in time.

Theoretical Beginnings

Every interest or group has a primary interest in establishing a monopoly (subsystem) on political understandings concerning the policy of interest, and an institutional structure that reinforces that understanding. The trick for policymakers is to convince others that their policy, program, or industry represents the solution to one of these long standing policy problems. Therefore it is important that a positive image of the policy of interest is constructed. Whether these groups that are vested in a given policy area will always be more active and are able to dominate policymaking in their area than those with nothing to gain, is the main question of agenda setting.

How a policy is understood and discussed is its policy image. Different people can hold different images of the same policy. Policy monopolies are often supported by the acceptance of a positive policy image and the rejection of possible competing images. Also the tone is critical to issue development because rapid changes in the tone of a policy image held by key social actors, such as the media, can initiate changes in patterns

of mobilization. For example, as the tone of stories in the mass media changes from positive to negative, opponents of the policy have an opportunity to attack the existing policy arrangement.

As assumed by many, social conditions do not always generate public policy. Before a social condition becomes a public policy problem, an argument must be made and accepted that a given problem can be solved by government action. The same follows for private problems. They need to be linked to public causes in order to demand governmental attention (i.e. drug abuse). Governmental response in return, depends on the acceptance of one story over the other by expert communities. No individual alone has the power to determine the definitions of public policy issues, which explains why it is this issue of the defining the public policy problem that is at the heart of the political battle. At the same time, there must be institutions or groups that have the authority to make decisions concerning the issue. This is termed policy venue. Policy venues can be monopolistic or shared. This interaction of image and venue is what allows for rapid changes in policy outputs during some periods and for prolonged stability during others.

Tracing Policy Change in America

Policy monopolies are continually being constructed and destroyed in American politics. The changing allocation of attention by national political leaders, the media, and the public drive this dynamic.

Case: Nuclear Power

In the case study of nuclear power, image and venue changes interacted first to make possible the construction of a powerful monopoly of policymaking surrounding nuclear power during the 1940's and 1950's. Extremely positive public understanding of nuclear power questions were associated with institutional changes meant to allow proponents of the industry to have complete control over its expansion. After the creation of this monopoly, attention slowly died as expected. Later in the 1960's and 1970's the issue rose again on the public agenda, and the tone shifted from enthusiastic to critical. With this shift in image came a shift in venue as a number of congressional committees, state governments and elected officials began to claim jurisdiction over nuclear questions. The shift in venue along with the shift in image plotted to destroy the nuclear power policy monopoly that the same forces created two decades before.

It is not unusual for policymakers to take advantage of periods of agenda access in order to build new institutions or to alter those already in existence. According to Baumgartner and Jones there are two types of agenda access in American politics, one is associated with enthusiasm and the other with criticism. When issues reach the public agenda by popular enthusiasm, conditions are at their best for the construction of a new policy subsystem. When an issue emerges through criticism, conditions are at their best for the destruction of any policy subsystem that may have been created in the past.

Like nuclear power, pesticides policy and smoking and tobacco have been considered either the solutions to natural problems, and therefore accepted and promoted with enthusiasm, or the source of tremendous social, economic, and health problems themselves.

Case: Tobacco

The media rarely ever covered tobacco, and government was supportive of the agricultural subsidy program. For the first 50 years of the 1900s tobacco was seen as an important crop that generated export earnings, support millions of farmers, and on which whole communities and even some state economies were dependent. This obviously led government to support the agricultural subsystem. After the 1950's the tobacco industry and the habit of smoking were glamorized in popular culture. With this increase in popularity, came an increase in media attention, which was soon driven exclusively by negatives. Health warnings from then on became the main focus for the tobacco industry.

Case: Pesticides

In the early part of the twentieth century, the demand for pesticides increased as small family farms grew into commercial farms. As this process occurred, many pesticides markets developed and farmers soon became confused with the variety of products available. As the years went by and researchers started looking more closely into the chemicals in pesticides, the attention shifted from total preoccupation with the economic aspects of the industry to a one-sided concern with the health and environmental aspects of pesticides. These new participants did not argue that pesticides were not economically efficient; rather they argued that the health and environmental consequences severely outweighed the economic gains of pesticides. As attention shifted from good to bad government actions were called for. Pesticides then went in the media from being an economic good to a major national problem that the government should solve. Where once people had seen only an economic fact, a social problem was developed.

Case: Drug Abuse

During the first part of the twentieth century drugs were not a concern of the media. There was small media attention between the 1930s and 1950s until the 1960s when drug abuse emerged as a major media story. Advocates of severe punishment for addicts found themselves in full motion. As the issue rose high on the policy agenda new solutions to the drug problem were proposed and these differed radically from the previously governmental stance toward drug addicts. With the support of President Nixon, education and treatment emerged as the solution of choice after this surge in media attention.

Class Readings

In the reading for the week True, Jones and Baumgartner reiterate Baumgartner and Jones Theory of Punctuated-Equilibrium. Their main points are that policymaking both goes through periods of change and stability and issue come onto the policy table and as they recede, political institutions are continuously promoting the theory of punctuated equilibrium and that policy images are critical in whether a policy monopoly will maintain control over the issue or if it will be destroyed by opposing images.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith on the other hand have a somewhat similar take on policymaking, their Advocacy Coalition Framework. This framework is based on the assumption that a coalition is held together by the agreement of policy core beliefs. And further they assume that these policy core beliefs are resistant to change. Therefore

change is only possible if something originating from the outside of the system disturbs the resources or the views of coalitions within the subsystem.

This like Baumgartner and Jones explain is similar to punctuated equilibrium. The Advocacy Coalition is a monopoly until something happens, for example media attention, that alters the views of people and allows for opponents of the policy to step in and turn the policy around.

Assessment

Agendas and Instability in American Politics is a stimulating inquiry into the agendas and the nature of the political system. Baumgartner's and Jones's thesis is that "the American political system, built as it is on a conservative constitutional base designed to limit radical action, is nevertheless continually swept by policy change, change that alternates between incremental drifts and rapid alternations of existing arrangements." (p. 236) I found their explanation to be easy to understand and the case comparisons useful in understanding their thesis. But the idea that the United States political system is characterized by periods of institutional stability that are upset rapidly and dramatically by new definitions, issues and institutions does not seem as novel as Baumgartner and Jones suggest. They suggest a very simplistic way of looking at public policy agenda setting, that for an individual with no public policy making background would be enlightening, but for someone with some knowledge many not be as fulfilling as anticipated.

Citations

Baumgartner, F. & Jones, B. (1993) *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*.
University of Chicago Press.