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Agendas and Instability in American Politics
Frank R. Baumgartner & Bryan D. Jones

ABSTRACT

The book *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones was written in the year 1993, yet it provides a contemporary overview of the forces that influence the creation of public policy. The book is divided into three parts: Theoretical Beginnings, Tracing Policy Change in America, and Structural and Contextual Change in Politics. The book provides research, interviews, case studies, and comprehensive analysis that trace issues from problem phase into policy implementation. The authors outline the forces that can push a policy out of the public eye and the cycles that can move a policy back into spotlight after years of seeming inaction on the part of government. The final section of the book focuses on recent changes in policy including: the rise of interest groups, the growth of factions in policy-making, the changing nature of the relationships between local, state, and the federal government in the policy arena.

SUMMARY

Theoretical Beginnings

“Does the American political system provide a safe haven for privileged economic interests, or does it ensure competition among political ideas, constantly providing opportunities for those on the losing side to reverse their fortunes?” (pg. 3).

The authors propose the idea that “policy subsystems are constantly created and destroyed in American politics” (Baumgartner and Jones p 6). At one stage, there may be a policy monopoly where the institutions are formed around a set of core values and interest that block the influence of groups that oppose them. Sides are drawn along either side of a few major issues surrounding: progress, participation, patriotism, independence from foreign domination, fairness, and economic growth (B & J, p. 7). Change to the policy environment generally occurs incrementally but forces such as coverage by the media and social forces can push a policy back onto the national agenda. While businesses exert influence in the realm of policy, the authors come to the conclusion that business is unable to establish an “equilibrium point” where they could get free reign in support of their policies. A strong push in any direction causes a reaction from the other side of the political spectrum. These ideas are very similar to the work of Arthur Schlesinger who argued that there is a constant shift between public purpose and private interest (Theodoulous and Kofinis p.204).

Conflict fosters change in policy development and bringing forward a policy agenda. It is role of policy entrepreneurs to “either push their issue toward the public agenda or make sure it doesn’t arrive there” (B & J, p. 20). An agenda-setter is creating a disruption to the fragile political balance that occurs between different sub-systems to force change. The strategies they can use include forcing the issue into the media, mobilizing the apathetic, changing policy images, and pushing the policy into the hands of change makers that are the most appropriate for the particular issue. With the change of administration, a flood of media attention or public outcry the “equilibrium point” can tip from inaction to action in a policy venue.

Finally, the authors discuss the difficulty in collecting traditional data in relation to a particular issue. It is nearly impossible to point to one source and identify it as the cause of the success or failure of a particular issue in the political arena. Generally, there is a series of actions and events that push or prevent an item from going forward into action. To expand on that idea, in *The Art of the Game* the authors describe policy termination as a rare phenomenon where policies reappear even after periods of seeming inaction (T & K p.206). A researcher may be able to trace the appearance or reappearance of an issue, but it may be nearly impossible to evaluate the forces that surround it.

Tracing Policy Change in America

The next section of the book applies the theoretical framework to various examples. The authors use issues such as nuclear power, the environment, public health, and public safety to show how forces work to push an issue forward or force it off the agenda. These sections use case studies, interviews, records of Congressional hearings, and analysis of the frequency and type of media coverage given to the issue. The authors identify two major approaches to mobilization: the tide of fear and the wave of enthusiasm to push an issue into the spotlight. The mix of diverse sources adds to the weight of each of the arguments. This section of the book is interesting if for no other reason than the creative way the authors took in analyzing the role of the media by studying the role that sensational headlines play in the policy arena. The fact is that media has become a key player in the realm of public policy. Researching the role provided a challenge.

The book provides a clear illustration of the role of the media when it tracks the issue of nuclear power. First, it begins by graphically illustrating a rise in momentum in scientific journals in the late 1940's outlining the potential benefits of nuclear power. Then, it traces the increasing involvement of regulations and oversight. They show a growing disinterest in the issue on Wall Street beginning in the early 1960's. Then, the policy attitude shifts to one of a tide of fear after a series of incidents in the 1970's with public attitude finally shifting to negative according to surveys taken in 1979. It is interesting to note that the public perception of nuclear power trailed behind that of policy makers and the media. According to the research, negative media coverage outweighed positive media coverage in 1968. Negative congressional hearings on nuclear power outweighed positive ones as far back as 1969. The media was the agent that pushed forward a change in policy and public perception.

Structural and Contextual Change in Politics

The final section of the book focuses on the long-term changes that have occurred in the structures and the overall context of making policy in America. The chapters provide an overview of dramatic changes that have occurred over time. The first change is in the rise of the interest groups. The authors use the example of the environmental movement and the impact it has made on public policy. The second change deals with changes in the structure of congressional behavior as congress has become a policy battlefield where factions batter and intimidate rivals. The third change outlined by the authors is the role of federal funds in policy. An allocation of grants can make or break the ability to address an issue on the local or state level. Finally, the

authors describe the changing relationships between the federal government and local and state government. Of particular interest here the tied in discussion of both Kingdon and Schlesinger and their work describing a “national mood”. Forces can come together at a particular point in time to create an atmosphere where it becomes possible to make policy changes .

ASSESSMENT

Relevance

While it would have been impossible in 1993 to predict the role of the internet in mass media, the authors are able to outline the role of multiple media outlets in American politics in a way that is still relevant in 2006. The authors use the power of research to illustrate the way the media can distort or reinterpret a limited version of the facts to a general public that is willing to believe what the read or see on television. One newspaper or television station can make a negative or positive report on issue. As said in “The Players: Institutional and Noninstitutional Actors in the Policy Process”: the public trusts the media to shape their opinions- “no one can be everywhere; no one can experience everything... all of us rely on media portrayals of reality” (Cahn p. 207).

The information that was provided by the authors was enlightening but could have dug deeper into the issues. The increasing role of the media is especially timely because even though the numbers of news sources had increased, the mainstream continues to report on a limited number of topics. The complexity of media influence could have been strengthened by including discussion of the work of Iyengar and Kinder published in 1987. In News That Matters: Television and American Opinion, they describe the

concept of “priming”. This is where the media chooses some items over others, thereby shaping national events.

Of particular interest was the section Cities as a National Political Problem. The description of the rise and demise of the urban initiative describes how an issues can go from local to national, from inaction to response to off the national policy stage. That section provides some hope that many current issues could end up on the national agenda in the future, but also furthers pessimistic views about the current policy monopoly in Washington.

In the current administration, it could be argued that many urban issues are not on the agenda. This is similar to the conditions in the late 1950’s. Forces soon mobilized and grew into movements that brought about change in urban areas beginning in the 1960’s. The Congress and the press lost interest in rebuilding cities in the 1970’s. Finally, the dawn of the Reagan era signaled an end to attention on urban issues. It could be argued that policy subsets may form again or already forming to push forward an urban agenda that may emerge as the current administration comes to an end.

One of the limitations of the book is that it does not have an opportunity to fully analyze how local or state policy impact America. It is more of an overview of policy and policy theory. The authors mention the relationship between the levels of government the complexity that exists in politics at all levels. By narrowing the focus, the authors can create a thesis and supporting material as opposed to a fractured work that does not provide any new insight into the policy process.

Comparisons

The authors of the book do an excellent job of tying together the ideas of other policy theorists in a way that make their arguments easy to understand. The authors rely heavily on the work of others but the work reaches a place where they further the understanding of the issues. This is done through the case examples that they trace through the policy realm. In particular, the nuclear power example is a synthesis of many of the ideas from the semester. This book tied closely with the work of John Kingdon and his book *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies (1984)*. In presenting this information, it could have been beneficial to expand more on the references they made to the “window of opportunity” theory (p. 144) and how this applies to the major ideas of the book. The policy window was briefly mentioned. However it would have tied perfectly in with some of the case studies from the book.

Personal Observations

The work of creating and shaping policy is extremely complex. No one book could sum up all the interworkings of the policy process. However, Baumgartner and Jones cover a significant amount of ground. Furthermore, they provide research gathered from a variety of sources and types that strengthens the readers understanding of the material. Of all the works covered this semester, this material goes well as a complement to the work of John Kingdon. In fact, it could be argued that it is an extension of his material that covers the decades since his work was written. It is an excellent summary of the policy process in a way that is easy to digest due to the concise chapters.

The information provided on the media was particularly relevant in affirming my personal observations on the policy process as it relates to the federal government. It clarified ideas I already had about the media and the role of factions. For example, while the war in Iraq continues, multiple forms of media such as newspapers, television, and radio decided to have lead stories on celebrities. Many policy groups with ties to the War in Iraq would question why their issues are being pushed out of the media in favor of stories that aren't really newsworthy. Meanwhile, politicians are lining up on opposite sides of the issue to build momentum into the November elections. Currently, Republicans have a policy monopoly in Congress but that may change in response to the election.

Final Review

Essentially, this book is a retelling of many of the other works we have covered during the semester. The book validates ideas I already had on policy. It also formed arguments that I felt added to my understanding of the issue. At 298 pages, I would recommend the book to students who are looking for an overview of particular topics contained in the book. However, I wouldn't recommend reading the entire book as a sole source of information on public policy.

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