

Research Agenda
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August 2014

MOTIVATION

A former undergraduate student often referred to politics as “poli-tricks.” He intuited that governmental procedures and interactions were consciously designed by the advantaged to maintain their advantage. Terry M. Moe came up with a similar finding through political science and economic research:

“Most political institutions are instances of the exercise of public authority. They arise out of a politics of structural choice in which the winners use their temporary hold on public authority to design new structures and impose them on the polity as a whole. These structures are simply vehicles by which they pursue their own interests, often at the expense of losers.” (T. M. Moe 1990, 222)

Moe also explains that what is special about public authority is its coercive and all-encompassing nature:

“The unique thing about public authority is that whoever gets to exercise the has the right to tell everyone else what to do, whether they want to do it or not. When two poor people and one rich person make up a polity governed by majority rule, the rich person is in trouble. He is not in trouble because the majority rule is unstable. Nor is he in trouble because the three of them will have difficulty realizing gains from trade. He is in trouble because they will use public authority to take away some of his money. Public authority gives them the right to make themselves better off at his expense. Their decisions are legitimate and binding. They win and he loses.” (Moe 1990, 221)

Political actors compete to have public authority work in their favor (this assumes that the exercise of public authority is a zero sum game). Political institutions are mediating, organizational structures purposed to standardize the processes for deciding upon the exercise of public authority, and for actually exercising it. **My research agenda is to understand how the policymaking properties and tendencies of political institutions advantage or disadvantage competing political actors. I am especially interested in state and local government institutions** due to the lack of media coverage they receive (Palmgreen and Clarke 1977; Gormley Jr 1979; Berkowitz 1990; Graber 1993; Lynch 2000; Alvarez 2010). This research deals fundamentally with the question of representation, but deals primarily with institutional influences on political decision-making, especially the decision-making of small legislatures and executive agencies, both elected and appointed. It involves the advocacy strategies of interest groups, especially business groups whose relative size and stakes in political decisions are sufficiently large to motivate their independent political activity (Olson 1965; Hart 2004; Hillman, Keim, and Schuler 2004). Finally, it focuses on voters and intermediary organizations like the news media, their interactions with government, desires from government, and information about government.

DISSERTATION

The motivation to understand how political venues advantage or disadvantage the typical array of political actors led me to what appeared to be an omission in a leading theory of policy change. Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (1993) originated what is often referred to as the punctuated equilibrium model of policy change. They argue that the politics surrounding how policymakers give attention to a policy issue explains its scope of policy change: when attention to an issue is low, policy changes incrementally; when attention is high, policy change is punctuated; and a number of things can generate policymakers' attention to issues, especially attention by the media and the public to that issue as well as the advocacy of interest groups and other policy entrepreneurs. My fairly immediate reaction was to ask "What role does the political institution play? Does it condition the attention and advocacy of other political actors? Does it directly affect the scope of change, with certain venues more likely to enact incremental or punctuated change?"

My mind was primed to ask those questions because of the many literatures that imply that political institutions—in Baumgartner and Jones ([1993] 2009) and my dissertation referred to as political venues—differ in their policymaking tendencies and in other, possibly relevant ways. Capture theory holds that regulated interest groups can readily capture the policymaking of their regulatory agencies by their control over information and the socialization of agency staff within the industry (Dal Bó 2006; McConnell 1966; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987; Wilson 1989). Other research focusing on bureaucratic decisionmaking illustrate that industry groups might formally be included in decisionmaking either by proxy through its "representatives" holding positions on the agency's governing board, through incorporation on advisory panels, or by the agency being required to reach collaborate formally with regulated interests when making decisions (Black 2005; Wood and Waterman 1991; Petracca 1994; Balla 1998). Research on policy subgovernments bring in the legislative committee as a venue, networking with the agency and the interest group to achieve much of the same mutually beneficial, self-reinforcing policymaking that capture theory predicts (Hamm 1983). Terry Moe's (1984; 1990) focus on transaction costs and Marcus Ethridge's (2010) focus on gridlock (see also McCormick 1981; Skowronek 1982), both argue that policymaking proceeds slower, with more actors to bargain with, if not more bargaining altogether, with less consensus about the possible directions of policy when the full legislature considers a policy than when the agency or even a policy subgovernment is considering the issue.

This research foundation leads to alternative predictions than what is proposed within punctuated equilibrium theory. Baumgartner and Jones argue that no venue "is inherently better than any other" in favoring certain interests over another; groups disadvantaged by the status quo simply need to find any new venue that will give attention to their perspective on the policy issue (Baumgartner and Jones [1993] 2009). Pulling on the literature, I array hierarchically the political venues of the U.S. federated, separation-of-powers system along the lines of the constitutional authority of its decisions, the barriers to access interest groups face, the collection and use of information in the venue's decisionmaking and the costliness of bargaining in that venue. My alternative prediction argues that disfavored groups need to (and do) seek a higher political venue to induce (punctuated) change; the converse also being true. Punctuated equilibrium theory also models policy change as requiring consensus among policymakers around a particular direction of policy. I also argue that certain venues are willing to enact punctuated change without such a consensus.

The dissertation tests these predictions in three ways. The first test uses a random sample of issues lobbied for in the 106th & 107th Congress (1999-2002) from Baumgartner et al. (2009) to test the predictions on interest group behavior. Do interests seeking change lobby any new venue or higher venues. The second test focuses on a new issue politically—hydraulic fracturing—to examine the predictions on political venue and policy enactments within a context where there is not yet a status quo, government-issued policy. The third test will revisit the cases from the first test to predict the extent to which moving to higher or lower political venues advantages or disadvantages the type of policy change desired by interest groups.

OTHER AREAS OF RESEARCH

I am curious about other areas as well, though they tend to all deal with sources of privilege due to rule-ordered behavior. For example, my advisor, Robert M. Stein, and I collaborated on a study investigating whether early voting—billed as a convenience for voters—advantaged the political candidates. We find that early voting advantages incumbents in that it raises the costs of campaigns, costs that are more easily overcome by the incumbent than by the typical challenger. I have completed a here-to-date unpublished paper on campaign contribution patterns that takes advantage of the lack of limits on the amount of campaign contributions in Texas to distinguish between the electoral and advocacy motivations of interest groups more clearly than can be done in the context of Congress.

I have not abandoned my interest in Latin America. I collaborated with Carla Martinez on a paper investigating to what extent demographic change caused by outmigration positively influenced drug cartel-related violence in the Mexican states. Presented as a poster at the 2011 MSPA Conference, we found strong correlation between the two phenomena but could collect sufficiently micro-level data to parse out the exact direction and timing of the correlation. My Masters Thesis at the University of Texas at Austin chronicled the advocacy of the Afro-Brazilian political movement in the mid-1990s that was aimed at addressing the *de facto* policies of racial discrimination in that country.

METHODOLOGY

I am a strong proponent of empirical, statistical investigation. While I favor case studies, especially for highlighting nuance-like phenomena that yield more precise empirical variables, even case studies should corroborate their assertions by statistical means (e.g. Carpenter 2000; Kernell and McDonald 1999). I favor more inventive research designs over more statistical manipulation. For example, Stratmann (2005) and Gordon (2005) use inventive designs to show how money, in fact, affects legislative voting (for counterpoint see Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003). Nevertheless, I am talented at appropriately applying less-used statistical models based on the nature of the behavior being modeled. For example, I used a Tobit model to capture the punctuated nature of campaign contributions when studying “early money” versus “late train” contributions in the 2004 and 2006 Texas Senate races. I am prolific in STATA, though I can manage in R and even more wide-ranging programs like Mathematica and Excel.

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