Problem definition and information provision by federal bureaucrats

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Abstract

Federal bureaucrats are important sources of information about policy problems. However, federal officials compete for this influence with organized interests plying their own problems and solutions. We attribute the differential agenda influence of the federal bureaucracy to efforts in Congress to construct workable problem definitions in a context of uncertainty about issues. From both behavioral and rational models of congressional decision making, we develop a theory of congressional search for information during problem definition under conditions of uncertainty. The theory presages the prominence of federal bureaucrats in this search, and especially under uncertainty. Using new data sets capturing the appearance of federal bureaucrats at congressional hearings, we find that the mobilization, prominence, and types of federal bureaucrats providing information is explainable in terms of congressional uncertainty about problem definitions.

Keywords: Bureaucracy; Congress; Public policy; Problem definition

1. Introduction

Federal bureaucrats are important sources of information in the policy process (May, Koski, & Stramp, 2014; Workman, Jones, & Jochim, 2009). Scholars often depict bureaucrats’ informational advantage as so powerful that incentive and personnel systems are necessary to thwart bureaucratic drift (Epstein & O’Halloran, 1999; Gailmard & Patty, 2013; Huber & Shipan, 2002; Lewis, 2008). In theories of public policy, bureaucracies occupy a central position in policy subsystems (May, Sapotichne, & Workman, 2006) and make up part of the web of actors, including organized interests, generating information about public policy (May, Sapotichne, & Workman, 2009a; 2006; Miller, 2004). More recently, scholars have emphasized that the information generated by federal bureaucracies is shaped by, and influences, agenda setting and problem definitions at higher levels of government (Baumgartner & Jones, 2014; Workman, 2015). Federal bureaucracies provide information about policy problems in a pluralistic political context where they not only compete with organized interests, but also with other federal bureaucracies (Workman & Shafran, 2015).

The crafting of a working definition of a problem allows the construction of policies, or solution sets, for those problems (Jones, 2001; Simon, 1996). Problem definitions are important because they offer opportunities for bureaucracies and other actors to expand influence, but also offer fissures that allow actors to exploit deficiencies in the current definition, or understanding, of a problem and induce policy change (Dery, 1984). Given this, the ability to influence problem definitions implies the ability to steer policy change. Political scientists have not paid a great deal of attention to problem definitions in recent decades, despite their importance for policy change. Moreover, bureaucracies represent the institutionalization of
particular definitions of policy problems (Workman, 2015, pp. 138–146), and considerable politics surround efforts to alter how bureaucracies define the problems they confront (May, Workman, & Jones, 2008). As such, the crafting of problem definitions, or working understandings, is a prime target of information generation and politicking of all types in the policy process, and especially in legislative policy making.

What drives attention to federal bureaucrats in the congressional search for information about policy problems? What types of bureaucrats are privileged in the construction of problem definitions? Theories about how federal bureaucracies operate in the policy process offer leverage in understanding how members of Congress might use bureaucrats in reaching an understanding of various policy problems. We argue that uncertainty guides decision making and choices about how to define a problems and search for information. We combine older insights from the fields of psychology and communication with those from public policy to derive some hypotheses about how best to understand the provision of information by bureaucrats and their prominence in policy debates. We assert that the central tenets of these theories have implications for the dynamics of mobilization in the hearing process and extend to how Congress searches for external information concerning policy problems.

We view bureaucratic participation as partly a consequence of the efforts of Congress to reduce uncertainty in decision making—especially concerning problem definition. These arguments are quite distinct from those characterizing standard theories of group mobilization and influence in the policy process. We test our basic assertions by examining the participation of federal bureaucrats in hearings on business and financial regulation over a significant period of time. While highlighting the importance of bureaucrats to congressional information gathering, our findings also hold more general implications for how we view the way in which Congress searches for information.

2. Issue dynamism and boundary-spanning problems

The sources of congressional uncertainty about problem definitions are twofold. The ability to prioritize policy issues and generate solutions presupposes that specific actors have jurisdiction over the problem and that the problem is defined in such a way as to allow solution generation. Congressional committees quite often engage in fierce competition in what King (1997) calls “turf wars” for jurisdictional supremacy and to control the contours of policy debate (Baumgartner, Jones, & MacLeod, 2000). That policy issues can be categorized easily is a more tenuous notion given the evolution and redefinition of policy issues (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005) and the interdependence of issues wrought by boundary-spanning policy problems (May, Jochim, & Sapotichne, 2011; May & Koski, 2013; May, Sapotichne, & Workman, 2009b).

Issues like climate change, homeland security, food security, and energy are examples of issues that span the boundary of existing issues, policies, and governing arrangements. These issues become ill-fit to existing structures for allocating attention (Sheingate, 2006). That is, they reside between or among substantive issues and functionally distinct governing arrangements. Their location in the agenda space sets in motion the struggle to define these problems. For instance, climate change defined in terms of environmental protection implies very different policies and considerations than does climate change understood in terms of its energy related dimensions. Such issues strain the existing set of governing arrangements and generate uncertainty about how to understand the policy problem. How might we expect the dynamics of issues to influence information search in legislatures?

Homeland security policy in the United States is an instructive case for beginning to understand how uncertainty about problem definitions might influence congressional information search. Standard distributional explanations of interest mobilization in this policy area would have predicted massive subsystem upheaval in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. All the elements for such a disruption were there. Massive resources, financial and otherwise, were available for analyzing, preventing, and mitigating future attacks. The federal bureaucracy was the target of great scorn, suggesting its value to Congress in information provision would have been down-graded. The creation of a “new” issue area and bureaucratic organizational upheaval might have suggested an opportunity for a restructuring of policy and flood of new participants into the policy process as Congress struggled to come to grips with the issue. This view of the potential of this disruption is heightened by the tremendous amount of money available for various programs protecting the homeland.

Yet, there was no “gold rush.” Research documents, in the case of federal policy on the risk associated with homeland security, that Congress faced mounting uncertainty in this issue area as the new millennium began and that the stability of the issue areas that might have been affected was astounding—to the point of inertial. And further, this stability was marked not only in the case of organized interests, but most especially in terms of the set of federal bureaucracies tasked with policymaking on the issue areas affected (May et al., 2009a, 2009b). Bureaucrats were central in defining the general directions of policy under extreme conditions of uncertainty. Further, the ultimate policy solution was an internal bureaucratic solution (May & Workman, 2009; May et al., 2008). This discussion focuses on the importance of bureaucrats in policy making generally and processes of congressional search in particular. This instructive case sets the stage for a general logic of congressional search for information grounded in uncertainty about how to understand policy problems and craft definitions that would allow the generation of solutions.
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