A Shaky Equilibrium: The Dynamics of Disaster Relief

Viviane Foyou
Valdosta State University
vefoyou@valdosta.edu

Jeff Worsham
West Virginia University
jworsham@wvu.edu

Prepared for delivery at the 2012 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, Portland. Copyright by the Western Political Science Association.
INTRODUCTION

FEMA is an agency under stress. We suggest this state of affairs has something to do with the dynamic nature of disaster relief policy and the seemingly impossible job it entails. This study is an effort to understand how the shifting definition of disaster shaped the context of disaster relief in the latter half of the 20th century. Torn between congressional demands to deal with natural disasters and presidential concerns with civil defense, FEMA was subject to a nearly constant set of countervailing pressures. Indeed, May, et al, (2011, 287) drawing on Jones and Strahan (1985, 175), suggest this tug of war between the executive and Congress makes agencies charged with disaster relief look like Dr. Doolittle’s ‘Pushmi-Pullyu.’ We suggest the executive-legislative dynamic, along with the multi-faceted nature of the policy responsibilities assumed by the public-risk subsystem, makes it difficult for agencies charged with public risk management to enjoy much success in meeting their policy responsibilities. Utilizing data gathered from the CIS Congressional Abstracts, the Policy Agendas Project (http://www.policyagendas.org/), and the American Presidency Project (http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/), we track change in the image of disaster relief by focusing on congressional hearing activity and presidential attention.

We seek to understand how congressional and presidential attention shapes the dominant image/focus of disaster relief. We suggest that the policy dynamics shaping disaster relief policy is a case study in how positive feedback can paralyze public bureaucracy. We open our study with a brief review of the literature dealing with policy equilibria and subsystems, before moving to the empirical portion of the paper and our effort to track the evolution of attention to disaster relief policy between 1947 and 2007.

POLICY EQUILIBRIA AND SUBSYSTEMS

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) has been used in a variety of policy realms to examine the interplay of positive and negative feedback in the maintenance of institutionally induced policy equilibria (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 1993, 2002; Cashore and Howlett 2007; Givel 2006, 2008; May 2010; Repetto 2006; True 1999; Wood 2006; Worsham 2006). The argument, in short, is that subsystem-induced policy equilibria, which foster an incremental inertia that gives the appearance of stability over lengthy periods of time, are subject to radical change at opportune moments. Whether change occurs depends on the ability of subsystems to contain challenges to existing policy arrangements. The beauty of PET is its ability to accommodate both the incremental nature of so much public policy, as well explain the moments of dramatic change that on occasion punctuate the seeming calm that characterizes so much of American politics. This study focuses on the institutional dynamic that serves as the bedrock of policy equilibria, examining how congressional committees and presidents shape disaster relief policy.

PET, drawing on group theory, suggests that congressional committees are designed to operate as self-correcting mechanisms. Using the example of a thermostat, Baumgartner and Jones (2002, 8-9) suggest that the majority of group theorists portray institutions as devices that regulate the temperature of the political hothouse. As such, congressional committees maintain stability by reacting to external pressures, making incremental adjustments to policy in reaction to external stimuli. They refer to this as negative feedback, in that “the system reacts to counterbalance, rather than reinforce, any changes coming in from the environment” (2002, 9).

---

1 We readily admit FEMA’s problems are not solely the result of cross pressures from political principals, but limit our inquiry to this aspect for our paper.
Negative feedback models posit that “shocks to the system are dampened, ... pressures from one side lead to counterpressures from another side, and in general ... self-corrective mechanisms keep the system on an even keel” (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, 6). In this fashion equilibrium is produced by institutional arrangements that are self correcting and inherently conservative, in the sense that they favor the status quo.

Subsystems are a key feature of this self-equilibrating mechanism and the subsystem approach itself is a direct descendent of group theories (Schattschneider 1935, 1960; Griffith 1939; Bernstein 1955; Maass 1951; Scher 1960; Long 1962; Cater 1964; Freeman 1955, 1965; Lowi 1969, 1979; Bosso 1987; Campbell 1988; Balogh 1991; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Worsham 1997). Subsystem models suggest policy equilibria are the result of bargains struck through institutional arrangements normally out of the public eye— with congressional committees, agencies, experts, and well-organized interests the central players. Once established, subsystems work to restrict the number and variety of interests involved in policymaking in a particular subject matter area, bringing stability to the otherwise volatile process envisioned by pluralists. Subsystems, then, are a means of getting around the seeming inability of groups to effect closure on decisions that affect large numbers of interests. They accomplish this through the creation of institutional and intellectual barriers to participation in the policy process. Of particular interest is the institutional dynamic that allows subsystems to operate in a semi-autonomous fashion in a particular policy area and how it is subject to stress or change.

The lynchpin in any particular subsystem is the congressional committee or subcommittee that serves as the legislative anchor for the subsystem. Recent research focusing on committee jurisdictions has noted the zeal with which committees guard their turf (Jones, Baumgartner and Talbert 1993; King 1994 and 1997; Talbert, Jones and Baumgartner 1995; Hardin 1998; Worsham 1998). No surprise, since control of turf grants one the power to set the agenda in a particular policy realm. This is no small concession to committees and the subsystems that they anchor. The functioning of Congress as a representative institution turns, at least in part, on the nature of committee jurisdiction and the type of representation it produces. If committees enjoy relatively secure status as policy monopolies, that is, if their control of turf is unchallenged, then Congress may operate as the exclusive representative of connected interests. Similarly, competition for committee turf may produce more varied policy outcomes. Studying change in committee control of policy jurisdiction is a central preoccupation of those studying policy subsystems, not only because “[t]urf—and the power that goes with it—defines a legislative committee” (King 1997, 1); but because control of turf determines the particular variant of subsystem politics in play and whose interests are represented in policy-making. Quite simply, which committee or combination of committees “decide things” has much to do with what is decided (King 1997). It also means that quite often, different committees provide very different settings for the consideration of public policy (Fenno 1973; Adler and Lipinski 1997; Worsham 1997; Adler 2002).

Still, jurisdictional control is not static (Riker 1980; Krehbiel 1991). A variety of macro-level forces outside the subsystem, as well as internal dynamics within a subsystem, provide a constant set of challenges to subsystem-induced equilibria (see Sabatier 1993; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Worsham 1997, 2006). This constant stimulation from within and without means that rather than thinking of a subsystem-produced equilibrium as static, it is more accurately portrayed as wavering between three political types—dominant, transitory and competitive—each of which involves a different group dynamic and opportunity to widen or narrow the variety of interests involved in the policy process (Worsham 1998).
The concept of subsystems as wavering equilibria explains why so much of policy involves change at the margins, rather than radical reconfiguration. That said, not all policy is incremental, nor is politics invariably the stuff of logrolls and “mutual non-interference pacts” (Lowi 1969). At times change is dramatic, politics are nasty, and disequilibrium is real (if only short-lived). Baumgartner and Jones (2002, 7) suggest that positive feedback models are those in which “ideas of momentum, bandwagon effects, thresholds, and cascades play critical roles” in the policy process. “A positive-feedback mechanism includes a self-reinforcing process that accentuates rather than counterbalances a trend. … The world of positive feedback processes is changeable, fickle, and erratic when compared with stable and predictable outcomes associated with negative feedback processes” (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, 13).

A focus on the ideas that undergird institutions, and how they are subject to change, is essential to understanding positive feedback and its role in producing disequilibrium. Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith (1993, 1999) have suggested that policy learning, which can produce dramatic policy change, is a result of shifts in the core beliefs of advocacy coalitions. For Baumgartner and Jones, positive feedback occurs either as a result of cue taking or mimicking; or is produced by the serial processing nature of individuals and institutions. In the former instance they suggest a threshold effect is in play, where a critical mass of interest or attention produces self-sustaining momentum (2002, 16-17). In the latter, something forces decision makers to shift their attention to a previously excluded dimension, which in turn changes the dominant view on the issue (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, 19).

We suggest that positive feedback is often produced by the actions of the president, whether this involves the president acting as a policy entrepreneur or is an example of leadership is not our concern (see the debate between Miroff 2003 and Sheingate 2003 in this regard). Policy entrepreneurs may come from rival subsystems, from rival institutions, or from outside government itself. The president is a prime candidate for such entrepreneurial politics. Presidents often bring new ideas and new policy proposals that threaten to upset existing policy equilibria. They may raise the salience of a previously non-salient issue, redirect attention to neglected dimensions of a problem, or reorient policy to fit with their agenda. One does not have to accept Wildavsky’s two presidencies thesis to recognize that presidential attention has a tendency to internationalize public policy, framing issues in a way that often emphasizes previously neglected international dimensions of an issue.

CONGRESSIONAL INTEREST AND POLICY JURISDICTION

Like others who have made an effort to track agenda entrance by focusing on congressional activity, we focus on hearing activity in this paper. We utilize the Congressional Information Service Index to Committee Hearings and Abstracts to Committee Hearings, along with data gathered from the Policy Agendas website, to identify hearings dealing with disaster policy between 1945 and 2007. In order to capture the swing between disaster relief and civil defense, we conducted two searches. After consulting the “index terms” function of the CIS we settled on the search terms "disasters," "drought," "earthquakes," "fires and fire prevention," "floods," "storms," and "tornadoes” to identify hearings (and committees) that deal with natural disasters. In order to locate hearings dealing with civil defense policy we used the terms “civil defense,” "Civil Defense Advisory Council," "Federal Civil Defense Administration," "Office of Civil Defense," and beginning with the 107th Congress, "homeland security." ²

² The index term “civil defense” is dropped in 1995, complicating the search process. Beginning in 1995, civil defense hearings are found using the natural disaster index terms, necessitating further culling of the data.
Our initial search produced close to 4000 hearings. After eliminating appropriations hearings and hearings which did not actually deal with natural disasters or civil defense, we were left with 3571 hearings--2109 in the House and 1462 in the Senate. In the case of the House this involved 1505 focused on natural disasters and 604 dealing with civil defense. The search of the Senate produced 1005 focused on natural disasters and 457 dealing with civil defense.

Our search for presidential attention uses the data available at the American Presidency Project website (http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/), a public archive that contains a wide range of materials of interest to those who study the American presidency. We conduct a key word search of public papers on a yearly basis, settling on “natural disaster,” “civil defense,” and “terrorism” as our search terms, after experimenting with the various types of natural disaster—hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, etc—and various terms associated with civil defense—homeland security, national security, and similar. We were careful to only include presidential attention to natural disasters and civil defense issues in the United States, since we are interested in presidential attention directed towards FEMA responsibilities. All told, our search produced 6595 entries, 598 dealing with natural disasters and 5997 dealing with civil defense and terrorism (which we combine into a civil defense category).

Mapping Attention

We are interested in exploring the attention paid by Congress and the President to the two aspects of disaster relief, civil defense and natural disasters. And related to that, the difference in attention paid by these two institutions to each dimension of disaster relief. A review of figures 1 (Congress) and 2 (the President), reveal several features of congressional and presidential attention to disaster relief. For the most part, until the events of September 2001, natural disasters occupy more congressional space than does the discussion of civil defense (figure 1).3 While attention to civil defense has a brief peak in 1950, focused on atomic energy and the attendant fallout dealing with bomb shelters, and civil defense remains somewhat topical through 1960, the congressional interest is fairly subdued and never comes close to the attention paid natural disasters. Indeed, the up-tick in 1960 is associated with the Senate focus on the events surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis, which elicits little attention in the House, and sets the theme of a general lack of interest that characterizes the ensuing decades until the events of 2001. Rather, the bulk of the congressional agenda is occupied by the discussion of natural disasters. Attention to natural disasters is constant and steady between 1950 and 1990, after which there is a steady decline until the events of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Contrasting congressional attention to presidential interest (figure 2) suggests the reverse is true when it comes to framing disaster relief from a White House perspective. Presidents tend to pay more attention to the civil defense dimension, only focusing on natural disasters when they are national-level disasters, and even then, paying more attention to civil defense, which becomes salient in the 1970s and remains so though 2007 (with peaks in attention in the mid-1990s and in 2001).

figures 1 and 2 here

---

3 Because House and Senate attention to civil defense and natural disasters is so strongly correlated, and our interest is in contrasting congressional attention to executive attention, we combine the House and Senate counts in this section of the paper.
It would seem then, that when a president thinks of disaster relief, the issue is framed in terms of civil defense more often than not, while congressional attention emphasizes natural disasters and their mitigation. While this may not be iron-clad proof that political principals are sending different messages to disaster relief agencies, and FEMA in particular, it does suggest there is noise that could be clouding the disaster relief skies.

TURF CONTROL

Among their many functions, subsystems create order out of chaos. The congressional committee system developed, at least in part, for this same purpose. No wonder then that congressional committees serve as the anchor of any policy subsystem, and in the case of disaster relief might be expected to act as a means of processing and filtering the mixed messages being sent by the executive and Congress regarding the proper focus on disaster relief. In this section we interested in determining if committee efforts to establish jurisdictional rights brings order to the policy domain. We treat each chamber separately, since previous studies have suggested the House and Senate may actually provide different subsystem settings.

Figures 3-6 identify the committees that hold hearings in disaster relief and civil defense policy in the House and Senate. As Birkland (1998), among others, has noted with regard to efforts to formulate policy to deal with hurricanes, disaster relief policy in both chambers appears nearly anarchic (figures 3 and 4). Rather than ask who controls disaster relief policy, one might be inclined to ask who does not have a piece of the policy action? Thirteen committees in the House and a dozen in the Senate are regular players in the policy realm, with competition the norm during any particular year, as well as the dominant motif over time. Quite simply, no one appears in charge of disaster relief.

Compare this to the situation in the realm of civil defense (figures 5 and 6). While it might be hard to imagine more committee involvement in a realm than that found in natural disasters, we actually identified 14 committees in the House and 16 in the Senate who made regular appearances in the civil defense realm over the course of our study. That said, the policy realm displays more of the features of a policy monopoly or subsystem than is the case in natural disaster policy. While there are a wide variety of committees that show up in 6 or more years between 1945-2006, there are much fewer regular players--Armed Services in the dominant player in both chambers, followed by Government Operations/Governmental Affairs. It is not until 2002 that civil defense becomes subject to the intense competition and conflict that characterizes disaster relief policy. Even then, Armed Services maintains its presence in the policy realm, although the renamed Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee grabs the largest chunk of turf, followed closely by Judiciary (at least initially). Similarly, the Homeland Security Committee is a major new player in the House, although it appears to be involved in a realm characterized by oligopoly, sharing near equal space with Judiciary and Government Operations.

Our initial foray into tracking attention and turf control suggests Civil defense operates much like the classic policy monopoly, anchored by the Armed Services committees which enjoy
near monopoly control, interspaced with brief periods of competition, and relatively low salience. The events of September 2001 served as a punctuation to this relative calm, producing a new subsystem anchor in the Senate and institutionalizing competition in the House. While this observation comforts the second author, we are still perplexed by the seeming institutionalized anarchy found in the natural disaster policy realm, a subject to which we now turn.

THE TOPIC OF DISCUSSION

Picking up on an observation of Birkland (1998), who noted how focusing events affect the shape of policy communities, we developed a coding instrument intended to get at the multiple dimensions of disaster relief policy in an effort to say something more d. Birkland (1998, 62) found the earthquake community was more “coherent, organized and ongoing” than was the case with the policy community dealing with hurricanes. This being the case, one might expect the identity and variety of committees involved in the discussion of earthquakes to be markedly different than that focused on hurricanes (controlling for the free-for-all associated with a punctuating event). We track the committees involved in various aspects of disaster relief in an effort to determine whether what looks like system level chaos actually masks a more orderly process. Utilizing the advanced search function of the CIS we broke disasters down by type, conducting separate searches for floods, storms, tornadoes, fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes—six of the eight search terms produced under the “natural disaster” heading.4 We are looking for evidence that the various sub-fields of disaster policy operate along lines associated with policy communities or subsystems, that is, that there is some coherence to how Congress processes the various issues.

figures 7 and 8 here

Figures 7 and 8 track the committees involved in each policy realm for the House and Senate, respectively. While only tornadoes in the House fit the criteria for a classic policy monopoly or dominant coalition, where the Science and Technology Committee dominates the discussion, many of the policy realms resemble an oligopoly typical of a competitive subsystem. In both the House (figure 7) and Senate (figure 8), two committees—Public Works and Resources, dominate the discussion of floods, with Banking a distant third (and in the House closely followed by Agriculture). Similarly, the discussion of hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, and drought in the Senate appear to be focused among two or three committees. That said, the House includes a wider group of players in each of these realms, with some policy realms, such as fire, close to anarchy.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the general consensus is that policy equilibria are not static, the existence of subsystems that function as wavering equilibria rules against accepting a chaos theory of public policy. If subsystem arrangements are dynamic due to some combination of macro-level events

---

4 We used the LexisNexis Congressional online search engine to conduct our search. Utilizing the “Index Terms” function we conducted a search under natural disasters. Given time constraints we were not able to get the “drought category” in this effort.
and internal (coalition-based) dynamics, they still serve as anchors for policy monopolies in a wide and varied set of policy realms.

While it may not be anarchy incarnate, the natural disaster policy realm is unusually chaotic. We suspect this has something to do with the nature of such events, even when like hurricanes they occur with regularity. Because they are unexpected, their consequences are difficult to predict and control, and they affect wide swaths of the population, they invite widespread participation. When we break disaster relief down by the type of disaster, we find some evidence that competitive coalitions are in place in both the Senate and the House. Still, many of the House-based systems appear borderline anarchic, suggesting that the near constant occurrence of these disasters overwhelms the safety valve feature of subsystems and the congressional committee system. It appears that disasters are often treated as externalities by established subsystems, raise salience among those whose constituency is involved, and lead to a situation in which players come and go with no settled pattern (reminiscent of the garbage can model of March and Olsen, 1984). While most of these events fall short of qualifying as punctuating events, Hurricane Katrina’s are relatively rare, they do make it difficult for any particular committee to establish jurisdictional control. No surprise, perhaps, since claiming natural disasters as one’s turf appears to be a no win situation for most legislators.

Contrasting the situation of natural disaster relief with civil defense suggests the latter operates in a more predicable fashion. So much of civil defense involves preparation for an event that may never occur, at least until September 2001, which appears to have allowed a civil defense policy subsystem to develop that looks more like the standard institution-based subsystem for much of the 20th century. Whether it remains so after the events of 2001 is a question for future investigation.
REFERENCES


Miroff, Bruce. 2003. “Entrepreneurship and leadership.” Studies in American Political Development. 17(Fall): 204-211.


Sheingate, Adam D. 2003. “Political entrepreneurship, institutional change, and American political development.” Studies in American Political Development. 17(Fall):185-203


