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First published 2013 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-0-333-92955-1 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-333-92954-4 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

Printed in China

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## Chapter 1

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# Why Study Institutions?

Institutions are central to the subject matter of political analysis. Indeed, up until the 1950s, institutionalism *was* political science, in the sense that the discipline concentrated upon the study of constitutions and the organizational arrangements of representation and government. Political scientists compared executive and legislatures, or parties and electoral systems, across countries and over time. Legal and historical methods dominated, alongside a descriptive idiom and a set of assumptions about what constituted a ‘good political system’.

The behavioural revolution made its challenge to institutionalism from the late 1950s onwards, questioning what lay beneath the formalisms of politics and using empirical investigation to find out ‘who (really) governs’ in different contexts (Sanders, 2010). A generation later, rational choice theorists sought to explain politics in terms of the interplay of individuals’ self-interest (Hindmoor, 2010). From another direction, neo-Marxists focused upon the role of ‘systemic power’ (deriving from capital/labour relations) in shaping politics (Maguire, 2010). Political scientists of all colours seemed intent upon debunking the institutionalist certainties of their forebears. The clear message was that there was much, much more to politics than the formal arrangements for representation, decision making and policy implementation.

What happened to the institutionalists who got left behind, as these powerful currents took the discipline in new directions? Many continued to practice their art in the conviction that ‘You only need to sit still, it all comes “round again”’ (Rhodes, 1995: 57). Others were provoked to defend their ‘common sense’ assumptions and methods – notably in sub-fields like public administration and constitutional studies. In fact, by the end of the 1980s, institutionalism had ‘come round again’ as the internal limitations of the new paradigms became clear. A ‘new institutionalism’ emerged as a response to the ‘undersocialized’ character of dominant approaches in the discipline, in which institutions were, at best, seen as no more than the simple aggregation of individual preferences.

## 2 *Why Institutions Matter*

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‘New institutionalists’ asserted simply that ‘the organization of political life makes a difference’ (March and Olsen, 1984: 747). Political scientists from different corners of the discipline flocked to the banner of new institutionalism. Historical and comparative scholars brought with them ideas about the institutional shaping of policy choices in areas like welfare and taxation (Steinmo *et al.*, 1992). Rational choice scholars drew attention to the role of institutional factors in structuring individuals’ choices (Weingast, 1996; Ostrom, 2005). Neo-Marxists developed ‘regulation’ and ‘regime’ theories to analyse the institutional variation that was played down by the structuralists of the 1970s (Painter, 1995; Stoker, 1995). Reflecting this upsurge of interest, Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 25) described the new institutionalism as ‘the next revolution’ in political science. Rather than returning to the descriptive and atheoretical style of an earlier generation of institutionalists, new institutionalists developed a more expansive definition of their subject matter (to include informal conventions as well as formal rules) and operated with more explicit (if diverse) theoretical frameworks. Historical, rational choice and sociological institutionalism were developed as distinct analytical approaches (Peters, 2005).

In this book, we tell the story of the new institutionalist ‘revolution’ and give our assessment of its contributions, positive and negative, to political science. But we also identify another set of less spectacular, but equally important, changes taking place. If the ‘old’ institutionalism was the first phase of the intellectual trajectory and the ‘new’ institutionalism the second, then we see in clear relief the emergence of a third phase. This development is characterized by a growing consensus across the (previously fragmented) schools of institutionalism around core concepts and key dilemmas.

As institutional theory has been changing rapidly over the last thirty years, so have institutions themselves. For this reason the book is not only concerned with new institutionalism as a way of understanding politics, but also with the development and spread of new institutions, which are structuring politics in new ways across the world. In fact, the two concerns are linked. As the organization of politics and government becomes more complex and fragmented, political scientists need access to more sophisticated theoretical and methodological tools. At the same time, the availability of these tools illuminates phenomena that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Some commentators have referred to the ‘de-institutionalization’ of politics and government, with the break-up of large scale bureaucracies

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and the growth of ‘soft’ processes like networking, collaboration or ‘steering’ (Rhodes, 1997; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). But political institutions have not become any less important; rather, they have changed. Institutional theory provides a good set of conceptual tools for analysing contemporary governance precisely because it does not equate institutions with organizations, nor assume that politics is determined by formal structures and frameworks alone. Institutionalists embrace institutional differentiation in political life, for instance the increasing role of markets and networks alongside hierarchy and bureaucracy. And they expect hybridity, anticipating that existing and emerging institutions will overlap and recombine in context-dependent ways. Moreover, they recognize that informal conventions can be as binding as formal constitutions, and can be particularly resistant to change. Most importantly, second, and now third, phase institutionalists underline the ‘double life’ of institutions, in which institutions constrain actors, but are also human creations (Grafstein, 1988: 517–18). The burgeoning political institutions we see around us have not landed from another planet; rather, they are the products of political action and the outcomes of political struggles.

### **What are institutions – and what is an institutionalist explanation?**

The dictionary defines ‘institution’ as ‘established law, custom or practice’. From the sixteenth century, the term has had a particular association with the practices and customs of government. Today, ‘institution’ also refers more generally to forms of social organization (Williams, 1983: 169). It is a multi-faceted term which is used to refer to social phenomena at many different levels – informal codes of conduct, written contracts, complex organizations. It also hints at some evaluation of these phenomena. Institutions are somehow ‘more’ than they appear: they are ‘special’ procedures and practices (Lowndes, 1996). Moreover, they show resilience over time, producing ‘stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour’ (Huntington, 1968).

As we live our lives, we play our part in both reinforcing and undermining the institutions around us. Institutions exist in every sphere of our lives, the social, economic and political. Marriage, markets, mosques, media... these can all be described as ‘institutions’. They all create ‘patterned interactions that are predictable’ (Peters, 2005: 18).

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While the sources of institutional regularities are diverse, they are also overlapping. We know that expectations regarding male and female roles in politics are shaped by the institutions of marriage and the family, the influence of which is not confined to the domestic sphere. The institutions of the market (prices, contracts, competition) increasingly penetrate the public realm as social activities become more commercialized and many state services are privatized. Religious institutions are no longer a ‘private’ matter as they come to shape political conflicts, whether in the USA, the Middle East or Europe.

But what does it mean to describe an institution as ‘political’? We can follow Adrian Leftwich’s (Held and Leftwich, 1984: 144) definition of politics:

politics is about power; about the forces which influence and reflect its distribution and use; and about the effect of this on resource use and distribution; it is about the ‘transformatory’ capacity of social agents, agencies and institutions; it is not about government or government alone.

It follows that, in understanding political institutions, we are as much concerned with what ‘ordinary people’ can and cannot do as with the capacities of government and the actors who directly inhabit the political arena. Political institutions shape the opportunities that all of us have as citizens to make our voices heard, to participate in decision making, and to access public services. Institutions like electoral systems, political parties, social movements and human rights legislation all affect what we can and cannot do politically (and the costs, risks and potential benefits involved). The way in which government is organized provides opportunities for citizens to make contact with their representatives and decision makers – through institutional mechanisms such as consultations, complaints systems or question and answer sessions, as well as traditional routes like voting. Whether citizens take up these opportunities is conditioned by other, less obvious aspects of the institutional configuration – such as the timing and location of public meetings – and by informal conventions about the way in which issues are discussed and decisions made. Institutional opportunities and constraints may operate differentially for particular groups of citizens: parents may not be able to attend an evening meeting, young people may be put off by traditional committee procedures, new migrants may need translation or interpretation facilities.

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While a bottom-up perspective is important, it is also true that the formal institutional architecture of the state sets parameters as to what is possible and impossible (and desirable/undesirable) for politicians and the civil servants who work for them. For example, whether a country has a proportional or majoritarian electoral system makes coalition government more or less likely, which in turn affects both the relationship between parties and the conduct of politicians towards their electorates. A prime ministerial system allows parties more influence over the executive than a presidential one. Equally in countries where state assets or services have been privatized, there is a reduction in the political influence of public sector workers, but new investment opportunities for business (and new incentives for business to lobby politicians or build alliances with consumer groups).

The influence of institutions over the conduct of politics is manifold, encompassing both the ‘dignified’ and the ‘efficient’ parts of the constitution (Bagehot, 1867), and reaching from matters of state to the day-to-day operation of local government. Informal institutions can be as powerful as formal ones – the debating conventions which are observed in a parliamentary assembly are not usually specified in writing but have a profound effect on the nature of that country’s politics. The ‘glass ceiling’ in public life has no formal status but remains effective in shaping women’s opportunities. The public service ethos that shapes the conduct of health or education workers in many social democratic states is sustained chiefly through informal processes and is part of a powerful legitimizing narrative about the role of public servants *vis-à-vis* their counterparts in the private sector.

Moreover, political institutions do not stand still. The familiar institutional landscape is being transformed as the international movement of people, goods and information gains pace. The technological revolution is both part of this phenomenon and a driver of it. Indeed, at the present time, many of our familiar political institutions are responding to these and other demands for change:

- Political parties have been challenged by new interest groups and social movements that reflect the fracturing and internationalization of political identities. Politicians assess electoral outcomes in the context of new mechanisms for gauging public opinion (polls, direct action, talk shows, blogs, tweets and e-petitions).
- Politicians and civil servants find themselves operating in an ever-more complex system of multi-level governance, in which they are constrained by transnational institutional frameworks – e.g. the



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European Union and also global agreements on climate change and trade, as well as more familiar military and defensive alliances.

- Pressures to reduce the scope of central state intervention have also increased the importance of ‘lower’ levels of governance – devolved assemblies, regional bodies and (on some matters) local councils.
- The drive for efficiency and competition has driven the break-up of state bureaucracies through privatization and marketization, and the formation of multi-sector partnerships involving public, private and civil society actors.
- Pressures to greater transparency are uncovering the continued significance (and ongoing adaptation) of informal institutions – like patronage, corruption and clientelism – in the interstices of seemingly accountable formal structures.

Our approach has the flexibility to extend its purchase beyond the Western liberal democracies with which we are most familiar. Unlike the ‘old institutionalists’ (see Chapter 2), we do not make any assumptions about the shape of political institutions or the values they embody. New institutionalism is just as interested in the ways in which political behaviour and identities are shaped (or more harshly delimited) by institutions of dictatorship, tribalism, militarism, one-party states or religious republics. The conduct of international politics (whether in relation to trade, migration, security or peacekeeping) across such very different institutional orders presents both politicians and researchers with formidable challenges.

So we have established the varied and dynamic nature of political institutions and introduced some of the ways in which they shape political behaviour. But what explanatory purchase does *institutionalism* give us over political phenomena that we may be missing when using other approaches? Guy Peters (2005: 164) summarizes the core proposition:

The fundamental issue holding all these various approaches... together is simply that they consider institutions the central component of political life. In these theories institutions are the variable that explain political life in the most direct and parsimonious manner, and they are also the factors that themselves require explanation. The basic argument is that institutions *do* matter, and that they matter more than anything else that could be used to explain political decisions.

### Box 1.1 Comparing institutionalist and non-institutionalist accounts

#### Case A: The UK MPs' expenses scandal

The United Kingdom Parliamentary expenses scandal resulted in a large number of resignations, sackings, de-selections and retirement announcements, together with public apologies and the repayment of expenses, after *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper obtained a leaked full copy of the expenses records and began publishing details in daily instalments from 8 May 2009. These disclosures dominated the British media for weeks, and appeared to show flagrant and gross misuse of the expenses system for personal gain by many MPs, including Government ministers, and across all parties. The popular analysis of the scandal focused on the agency of individual actors and on their self-maximising conduct in relation to 'public money'. The institutional perspective brings out the following additional points of significance:

- The rules for claiming expenses were only very loosely drawn and, when opportunities to tighten the rules were apparent, party leaders had not shown the political will to do so.
- The Parliamentary Fees Office failed to police claims and, in fact, encouraged MPs to claim for items which were later deemed to be outside the rules.
- At the extreme, some MPs intentionally maximized their pecuniary self-interest, but the majority of MPs believed that they were working within a set of practices which was explicitly endorsed by parliamentary officials and implicitly accepted by their party leaders.
- As the scandal unravelled, many were forced to repay expenses 'legitimately' claimed in previous years and MPs' resistance to reform and expressions of grievance at 'rough justice' hardened the public and media perception of their conduct.

The self-maximising approach ignores how the rules were drafted, enforced and retrospectively reinterpreted, and as such, only explains why some MPs began to 'fiddle' the system. It does not explain why others claimed very little, or no expenses at all, or why politicians continued to contest the public view to the point where they were clearly damaging their interests, individually and as a professional group.

Institutionalists contend that the greatest theoretical leverage is to be gained by studying the institutional frameworks within which political actors operate. In short, political behaviour and political outcomes are best understood by studying the rules and practices that characterize institutions, and the ways in which actors relate to them (whether they are politicians, public servants, citizens or social movements). The

## Box 1.2 Comparing institutionalist and non-institutionalist accounts

### Case B: Policy development in the European Union

Policy development in the European Union (EU) relies heavily on agreement being reached between its member states. In this context, realist perspectives in international relations, and the news media more widely, have tended to focus on EU ‘summits’ as the arena in which crucial policy developments are progressed as a result of diplomacy and bargaining between autonomous state actors. Since France and Germany possess the most political and economic ‘clout’ within the member states it is commonly assumed that most policy outcomes directly reflect the interests of those powerful states. By taking a longer-term view, the institutional approach highlights a number of significant policy initiatives which do not fit this pattern, and, indeed, have not been within the direct control of member states, as individuals or groups:

- Over the decades the EU has assumed a key role in the development of gender equality, but this was not a direct expression of the strategic intent of member states, but instead an unintended by-product of the inclusion of Article 119 in the original Treaty of Rome.
- The EU has intervened extensively in the field of health and safety at work, and has developed policies which exceed the standards required by most individual states. But here politicians have played only a loose supervisory role and ‘technocrats’ have pieced together best practice from many states to produce a whole which is greater than the sum of the individual parts.
- The EU Social Protocol was a summit outcome, but not one which key actors, including France and Germany, expected. Locked in a battle with an intransigent UK government, these states put forward a ‘deluxe’ version of the protocol which they expected to have to water down to bring the UK on board. In the event John Major’s government rejected all compromise, and, as a result, all other member states were locked into a much more ambitious and wide-ranging policy than any individual actor had proposed.

The international relations approach, therefore, tells half of the story in its accounts of the battles between high-profile actors in summits. However, it neglects a range of effects which generate from the nature of the policies themselves, and are influential in the lengthy ‘valleys’ between peaks. These include the unintended consequences of legislation, gaps in fit which allow lower-profile actors to shape policy below the surface, and pressures imposed by deadlines for agreement.

### Box 1.3 Comparing institutionalist and non-institutionalist accounts

#### Case C: The ‘global’ financial crisis

The series of shocks which hit a number of national economies in 2009 was narrated as a ‘global’ financial crisis. In fact, the greatest effects were felt by the USA and Europe and, within these countries, both the causes and impacts were shaped by the specific political and social context. An institutional analysis enables us to examine the interconnections between economies in terms of regulations and practices, but also challenges the ‘globalization thesis’ by focusing down on the fine grain of institutional change in each specific country and the responsibility of actors at various levels within that economy.

In the case of UK, the institutional approach brings out the following points of significance:

- During the 1970s and 80s, the UK lost much of its manufacturing industry and developed ‘service’ industries and financial products. The removal of regulations, which were seen to inhibit this shift, was a key policy initiative of the Conservative governments at the time, which was continued when New Labour came to power in 1997.
- For many years, banking in the UK had had its own formal code of ethics which constrained the conduct of employees in creating and selling products to customers.
- The developing process of deregulation at the national level weakened these constraints with the result that, at company level, actors were free to introduce ‘self-certification’, which was designed to allow applicants to receive mortgages on property without any checks on the truthfulness of their statements.
- The extra flow of capital into the housing market from these self-certified mortgages over several years created a bubble effect which led to the collapse of previously stable and highly regarded banks such as the Halifax Bank of Scotland (HBOS) Group.

And so while the ‘globalization thesis’ tends to disguise the difference between countries in terms of their financial policies and approach to regulation, the institutional perspective allows us to examine how actors at all levels played their part in generating a shock and how differences in impacts as well as causes can be better understood.

sorts of questions we might ask include: What are the formal ‘rules of the game’ within a particular political arena? What are the dominant practices that are not actually written down? Are there gaps between the formal rules and the way things ‘really work’? Are there frequently rehearsed ‘stories’ that explain why people act one way rather than

another? What do actors think will happen if they do not follow rules or observe dominant practices? How do actors circumvent, or seek to adapt, rules and practices? Do different actors relate to rules differently? Are there alternative rules and practices ‘bubbling under’? Are new stories emerging about how things *could* work in the future? How do actors react to those who want to change the rules?

As Peters (2005) has cautioned, institutionalism runs the risk of ‘conceptual stretching’ as it develops a more expansive definition of what constitutes a political institution. To guard against this charge, we need to be clear about what *is not* an institutionalist explanation, as well as what is. Quite simply, an institutionalist explanation puts political institutions first, and is different from (say) a structuralist, or an idealist or a behaviourist, approach, which prioritizes respectively the role of social and economic structures, political ideas or the observable behaviour of individual actors. Boxes 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 take a series of short vignettes and illustrate the difference between institutionalist and non-institutionalist accounts of the same political phenomena.

## **The contribution of the book**

Many valuable contributions have been made to evaluating the impact of institutionalism on political theory and research since the millennium. Hay’s (2002) *Political Analysis* is a seminal text of its genre, dealing not only with institutionalism but the full range of political theory from a broadly dispassionate stance. Peters’ *New Institutionalism* (2005) is an encyclopaedic account of (what we call in this book) first and second phase institutionalism, describing and categorizing particularly those varieties of institutionalism which have emerged during the second phase. The *Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, edited by Rhodes, Binder and Rockman (2006), is a collection of writings from distinguished scholars of institutionalism which, as a compendium, is not intended to have a central theme beyond the presence of institutions themselves.

Our approach differs from these contributions in taking an unashamedly ‘engaged’ approach. By this we mean three things. First, we are practitioners of, and indeed enthusiasts for, institutionalism: we have used institutionalist theory extensively in our own research and believe that it ‘works’ theoretically, methodologically and in the field. Second, and following from this, we believe that institutionalism offers

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