

THE  
OXFORD  
HANDBOOKS  
OF  
POLITICAL  
SCIENCE

GENERAL EDITOR  
ROBERT E. GOODIN

EDITED BY  
R. A. W.  
**RHODES**  
SARAH A.  
**BINDER**  
BERT A.  
**ROCKMAN**

≡ The Oxford Handbook of  
**POLITICAL  
INSTITUTIONS**

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*Edited by*  
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## PREFACE

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The study of political institutions is central to the identity of the discipline of political science. When political science emerged as a separate field, it emphasized the study of formal-legal arrangements as its exclusive subject matter (Eckstein 1963, 10–11). For a time, institutions “receded from the position they held in the earlier theories of political scientists” (March and Olsen 1984, 734). Recent decades have seen a neoinstitutionalist revival in political science—a return to the roots of political study. This *Handbook* begins in that most appropriate of places, an institutionalist call to arms by March and Olsen themselves.

While the older study of institutions is often caricatured today as having been largely descriptive and atheoretical, more nuanced accounts of the origins of the professionalized study of politics recall the profession’s early focus on political institutions as prescriptive based on comparative, historical, and philosophical considerations (see especially Chapter 6). The older studies of institutions were rooted in law and legal institutions, focusing not only on how “the rules” channeled behavior, but also on how and why the rules came into being in the first place, and, above all, whether or not the rules worked on behalf of the common good.

As political science foreswore its historical, legal, and philosophical foundations, it borrowed deeply from economics, sociology, anthropology, and social and (later) cognitive psychology—the currents of knowledge that formed the bases of the “behavioral revolution” (Dahl 1961). That revolution followed from empirical observations in organizational and industrial sociology and psychology that revealed discrepancies between behaviors and organization forms noted in the 1930s (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). People frequently did not adhere to the rules, and informal groups of peers often became more influential than the formal organizational settings these individuals found themselves in. Moreover, the advent of the technology of mass surveys at mid-century allowed researchers to discover how remote average citizens were from the normative role of involved rationality toward and comprehension of the political environment (Campbell et al. 1960). The institutions of constitutional government seemed to operate at some distance from the cognitive limits of citizens.

The return of institutions to the mainstream of political studies arose, in part, from comparative behavioral research suggesting that differences in behavior more

likely flowed from variations in political organization than in essential variability between citizenries of different political systems (Converse and Pierce 1986). But there also was a suspicion that less sophisticated versions of the behavioral revolution had run their course—that “opinions” were free-floating and unhinged from incentives to behave on them and that opinions were being treated as increasingly endogenous, that is, individuals had either more or less structure to their beliefs. What were the consequences, if any, of opinion? That question and the need to understand the nature of continuity and change were fundamental to the resurgence of institutions as a focus of analysis. Because institutions channeled the opportunities and incentives for behavior or induced powerful insulation to change, opinion distributions by themselves told us little.

Political scientists’ return to the study of institutions has been explored and developed in many venues, most visibly perhaps by James March and Johan Olsen (1984, 1989, 1995). As has become clear by the numerous essays examining the institutional and historical turn of political science, no single orientation characterizes the vast scholarship that falls under the heading of neoinstitutionalism (see, among others, Hall and Taylor 1996; Pierson and Skocpol 2002). And as the chapters in Part II of this volume attest, the range of theoretical approaches underlying the contemporary study of institutions is remarkably diverse, let alone the range of empirical and methodological orientations.

Despite the incredible growth in institutional studies in recent decades, we lack a singular definition of an institution on which students of politics can find wide agreement. Indeed, if anything, we have witnessed an even greater diversity of ideas over the period as to what constitutes an institution. This range of ideas is consequential: it signals that there are also considerable differences of view about why and how we should study institutions, about the impact of institutions, and indeed about the extent to which institutions may be thought to be endogenous (independent or autonomous) or inextricably exogenous (woven into traditions, culture, norms, and preferences).

There is no doubt that institutions are said to do quite a lot. For example, they may be thought to embed history and political thought and to reflect, therefore, a set of traditions and practices, whether written or unwritten. Institutions thus can be interpreted as reflecting habits and norms, more likely to be evolved than to be created. But institutions also may be seen as architecture and as rules that determine opportunities and incentives for behavior, inclusion and exclusion of potential players, and structuring the relative ease or difficulty of inducing change, and the mechanisms through which change may be facilitated or denied.

Rational-choice institutionalists think of institutions as a system of rules and incentives. They remind us that this way of seeing institutions has traditions in law, but also in political engineering. The founders of American political science were themselves proponents of a science of political engineering to improve the

common good—or at least they so justified these efforts in this way. Of course, the founders of the political science profession in the USA were themselves greatly affected by the temper of their times (the emergence of middle-class Progressivism as a political force) which emphasized the reform of political institutions as a way of weeding out both corruption and partisanship from politics—with the aim of reorganizing politics more in the form of administration. The institutional reform motif of American political science in the early twentieth century reflected not only the reform focus of its time but also the idiosyncrasies of its own political culture. Political institutions were largely seen as endogenous: rules, design, structures. It was plausible to imagine institutions in this particular way in a society that had developed a strong legalistic tradition based on written documents and that lacked a past struggle between aristocracy and commerce or a powerful working class mobilization. Thus, there was little history—or so it was perceived—to be embedded into American governing institutions other than through its colonial experience.

Defined as rules, design, and structures, institutions are a potential variable in the political process. In this view, rules that define institutions or that alter thresholds for participation in the institution are likely to be contested to the immediate political advantage of some set of actors over another. Institutions in this sense provide arenas for conflict, and efforts to alter them stimulate conflict inasmuch as they change the rules of the game in such a way as to alter the allocation of advantages and disadvantages. From this vantage point rules are never neutral, but are instead part of a struggle between challengers and holders of power.

Still, a more prevalent view of institutions as rules—derived from economic models of cooperation—suggests that institutions may be the product of agreements that are Pareto optimal—that is, one party is made better off, but no one is made worse off. Log rolls, reciprocities, mutual advantages also produce new institutional arrangements. And there is a reciprocal relationship here; that is, institutions of certain forms, particularly ones that fragment power and provide multiple veto points, are likely to induce log rolling, reciprocities, and mutual back scratching. Such conditions make coherent change or direction and central leadership less likely, all things equal, though hardly impossible.

Inevitably, institutions advantage some in the short term and disadvantage others, but the long run may be a different story. The same rules and structures may, over longer stretches of time, provide advantages or disadvantages to different interests, indeed even reversing which interests are advantaged or disadvantaged. The so-called filibuster rule of the US Senate, ironically the product of an effort to create greater institutional efficiencies by deterring tiny minorities from tying up the Senate indefinitely, clearly helps concerted and substantial minorities and frustrates majorities that are less than supermajorities. It had been used by conservatives to block liberals' civil rights agendas. Now it is being used by liberals to forestall the aims of conservatives. In this sense—what goes around comes

around—institutions that strengthen the blocking power of minorities may be remarkably equitable, though perhaps only when viewed in historical, rather than immediate, terms.

Historical institutionalists see institutions as continuities. As they point out, institutions are meant to be preservative. Indeed, the emphasis on path dependence is another way of saying that the transaction costs of doing things differently is almost always prohibitively high, although dire conditions may reduce the marginal costs of change. But if institutions are about preservation, politics is about manipulation and leadership is about overturning constraints. Consequently, institutions are like dried cement. Cement can be uprooted when it has dried, but the effort to do so is substantial. It is easier to alter the substance before it hardens. Exiting leaders want to harden their preferences through institutions; new leaders often want to extirpate the past. The consequence is that institutions may be designed to fail. Given uncertainty about future political control, majorities may prefer to hedge their bets (Tsebelis 1990) or even prefer to design ineffective institutions than risk having their creations used against them (Moe 1990).

Institutions, of course, are constituted at many levels. They may be constitutional; they may be procedural; and they may be programmatic—for example, national health insurance or national pension systems. One should expect programs that have been durable and thus thought of as being institutionalized to be more responsive to exogenous shocks than changes at the constitutional level. But it is not always clear that this logic obtains in a general sense. Durable programs are partly a reflection of the real financial costs of altering them and the political costs of changing popular programs. Changing the social security system wholesale by privatizing it could be done in an authoritarian system under the Pinochet government in Chile, but it has proven to be much more complicated in democratic systems. The cumulative weight of past choices—which help to shape actors' preferences, routines, and expectations—plus the preferences of stable majorities inhibit large-scale or relatively rapid change.

Clearly, in any conception of institutions, the cost of change whether formal or non-formal and whether financial or organizational must be part of what an institution confers. Equally, the political costs of trying to disturb the status quo are far greater where the struggle involves many actors with diverse preferences rather than only a few with homogeneous preferences. So, any system that makes decision-making difficult tends toward the preservation of existing institutions. But none of this is absolute.

Sociological institutionalism sees institutions as norms and culture. It points to an alternative view, which suggests that institutions are almost wholly exogenous, by which they mean that the history and norms of a polity become embedded into institutions. We think of institutions in this perspective as exogenous, because it is hard to consider them as creations of ambitious political actors. Instead,



institutions are viewed as independent entities that over time shape a polity by influencing actors' preferences, perceptions, and identities. Individuals are governed, as March and Olsen (1989, 1995) would say, by the "logic of appropriateness"—meaning that institutions can be considered as embedding rules and routines that define what constitutes appropriate action. Rather than acting out of overt rational self-interest, individuals are said to behave according to their sense of duty and obligation as structured by prevailing rules and routines. However, when preferences are sufficiently homogeneous, it may be in one's self-interest to get along rather than be seen as a deviant.

This view of institutions has implications for the character and pace of institutional change. We might say that there is a superstability to institutions because they are woven into an historical and normative fabric. In other words, there are no obvious means of altering institutions, short of significant social, cultural, or political change. The important implication is that institutions evolve in a rather indeterminate way, resembling if anything geological shifts and drift, rather than conscious design. This geological view recalls the perspective of institutional scholars of the early twentieth century, such as Edward Sait, who viewed institutions as "coral reefs" that grew by "slow accretions" (Sait 1938). The historical approach underlying this view of institutions as norms and culture should thus come as no surprise.

This brief survey of the multiple conceptions of institutions provides an apt launching point for this volume on political institutions. It may be that this book raises more questions than it answers about the origins, evolution, and impact of institutions on politics and policy alike. Our hunch is that such questions and controversies will remain central to the agendas of political scientists for some time to come. Where do institutions come from? How have they evolved and often hardened over time? How difficult or easy are the rules governing their change? What are the consequences of institutions for political behavior and policy outcomes? Can institutions resist exogenously induced pressures for change including leaders' efforts to overturn the past? These questions are at the heart of the chapters that follow—questions that we trust will continue to energize research on politics in the years to come.

Starting with a statement from the founders of the "new institutionalism," Part II builds on various attempts (Hall 1996; Lowndes 1996; Peters 1999) to characterize the diversity of institutional approaches. It surveys several theoretical approaches, including normative institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism, international institutionalism, constructed institutionalism, and network institutionalism, as well as older traditions. Part III covers the traditional concerns of political science with constitutions, federalism, executives, legislatures, courts, parties, etc. These reflect the broadening concerns of the field in recent years with chapters on international institutions and the institutions of state and civil

society. Furthermore, these reflect more recent interest in theory and the constructed nature of institutions. Finally, Part IV provides four reflections on “the state of the art” by some of the master practitioners of the field.

In his *Pensées*, Joseph Joubert (1842) advised, “One of the surest ways of killing a tree is to lay bare its roots. It is the same with institutions. We must not be too ready to disinter the origins of those we wish to preserve.” We disinter institutions, not to kill them, but rather to learn from them as repositories of our collective experience.

For any book on this scale, the editors need help. Rod Rhodes would like to thank Bob Goodin and Mary Hapel. Sarah Binder would like to thank Alan Murphy for research assistance. All the editors would like to thank the contributors for their patience and cooperation when asked to revise their chapters.

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PART I

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INTRODUCTION

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## CHAPTER 1

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# ELABORATING THE “NEW INSTITUTIONALISM”

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JAMES G. MARCH

JOHAN P. OLSEN

### 1 AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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An institution is a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances (March and Olsen 1989, 1995). There are constitutive rules and practices prescribing appropriate behavior for specific actors in specific situations. There are structures of meaning, embedded in identities and belongings: common purposes and accounts that give direction and meaning to behavior, and explain, justify, and legitimate behavioral codes. There are structures of resources that create capabilities for acting. Institutions empower and constrain actors differently and make them more or less capable of acting according to prescriptive rules of appropriateness. Institutions are also reinforced by third parties in enforcing rules and sanctioning non-compliance.\*

\* We thank Robert E. Goodin for constructive comments.

While the concept of institution is central to much political analysis, there is wide diversity within and across disciplines in what kinds of rules and relations are construed as “institutions” (Goodin 1996, 20). Moreover, approaches to political institutions differ when it comes to how they understand (a) the nature of institutions, as the organized setting within which modern political actors most typically act; (b) the processes that translate structures and rules into political impacts; and (c) the processes that translate human behavior into structures and rules and establish, sustain, transform, or eliminate institutions.

Institutionalism, as that term is used here, connotes a general approach to the study of political institutions, a set of theoretical ideas and hypotheses concerning the relations between institutional characteristics and political agency, performance, and change. Institutionalism emphasizes the endogenous nature and social construction of political institutions. Institutions are not simply equilibrium contracts among self-seeking, calculating individual actors or arenas for contending social forces. They are collections of structures, rules, and standard operating procedures that have a partly autonomous role in political life.

Institutionalism comes in many flavors, but they are all perspectives for understanding and improving political systems. They supplement and compete with two other broad interpretations of politics. The first alternative is a *rational actor* perspective which sees political life as organized by exchange among calculating, self-interested actors. The second alternative is a *cultural community* perspective which sees political life as organized by shared values and world-views in a community of common culture, experience, and vision. The three perspectives—institutional, rational actors, and cultural community—are not exclusive. Most political systems can be interpreted as functioning through a mix of organizing principles. Nor are the perspectives always easy to distinguish. True believers in any one of the three can reduce each of the other two to the status of a “special case” of their preferred alternative. Pragmatically, however, the three perspectives are different. They focus attention on different aspects of political life, on different explanatory factors, and on different strategies for improving political systems.

The key distinctions are the extent to which a perspective views the rules and identities defined within political institutions as epiphenomena that mirror environmental circumstances or predetermined individual preferences and initial resources; and the extent to which a perspective pictures rules and identities as reproduced with some reliability that is, at least in part, independent of environmental stability or change.

Within an institutional perspective, a core assumption is that institutions create elements of order and predictability. They fashion, enable, and constrain political actors as they act within a logic of appropriate action. Institutions are carriers of identities and roles and they are markers of a polity’s character, history, and visions. They provide bonds that tie citizens together in spite of the many things that divide

them. They also impact institutional change, and create elements of “historical inefficiency”.

Another core assumption is that the translation of structures into political action and action into institutional continuity and change, are generated by comprehensible and routine processes. These processes produce recurring modes of action and organizational patterns. A challenge for students of institutions is to explain how such processes are stabilized or destabilized, and which factors sustain or interrupt ongoing processes.

To sketch an institutional approach, this chapter elaborates ideas presented over twenty years ago in “The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life” (March and Olsen 1984). The intent of the article was to suggest some theoretical ideas that might shed light on particular aspects of the role of institutions in political life. The aspiration was not to present a full-blown theory of political institutions, and no such theory is currently available. The ideas have been challenged and elaborated over the last twenty years,<sup>1</sup> and we continue the elaboration, without making an effort to replace more comprehensive reviews of the different institutionalisms, their comparative advantages, and the controversies in the field.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 THEORIZING POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

The status of institutionalism in political science has changed dramatically over the last fifty years—from an invective to the claim that “we are all institutionalists now” (Pierson and Skocpol 2002, 706). The behavioral revolution represented an attack upon a tradition where government and politics were primarily understood in formal-legal institutional terms. The focus on formal government institutions, constitutional issues, and public law was seen as “unpalatably formalistic and old-fashioned” (Drewry 1996, 191), and a standard complaint was that this approach was “relatively insensitive to the nonpolitical determinants of political behavior and hence to the nonpolitical bases of governmental institutions” (Macridis 1963, 47). The aspiration was to penetrate the formal surface of governmental

<sup>1</sup> March and Olsen 1984, 1986, 1989, 1995, 1998, 2006. Some have categorized this approach as “normative” institutionalism (Lowndes 1996, 2002; Peters 1999; Thoenig 2003). “Normative” then refers to a concern with norms and values as explanatory variables, and not to normative theory in the sense of promoting particular norms (Lowndes 2002, 95).

<sup>2</sup> Goodin 1996; Peters 1996, 1999; Rothstein 1996; Thelen 1999; Pierson and Skocpol 2002; Weingast 2002; Thoenig 2003.



