

Institutional Theory in Political Science

On the first page of his book *Institutional Theory in Political Science* (2012),¹ B. Guy Peters states that the “roots of political science are in the study of institutions”. Where political science has left the study of something so fundamental as institutions for rational choice and behaviouralism is a loss and therefore needs to be accommodated. This is where institutionalism comes in, which seeks to “[explain] the decisions that the governments make” – be it their values, rules, incentives, “or the pattern of interactions if the individuals within them” (184). Commonly the “consider institutions the central component of political life” (Ibid.).

Now, presenting that there is a *New institutionalism* states that there first was an *Old institutionalism*,² both which studies institutions and how they affect social and economic life. An institution, according to Peters, is a “structural feature of society and/or polity” (19), and is recognized by its: (1) predictability; (2) stability over time; (3) affect on individual behaviour, and; (4) sense of shared values between the members (Ibid.).

Old institutionalism focus on the formal institutions, meaning law and government,³ trying to “describe and understand the political world” (3). Previously scholars have asked questions that “tended to concern the nature of governing institutions that could structure the behaviour of individuals” (3). Initial study therefore focuses on the creation, and success, of institutions – how they where governed (Ibid.). This was, according to Peters, the 'beginning' of political science. One could exemplify this theoretical approach by looking at the works of Aristotle and his fellows who observed the neighbouring city-states of ancient Greece, and comparing them.⁴ Hence, Old inst. Is more descriptive and comparative in how the formal institutions constitute law, government and political governance. For example, comparing presidential and parliamentary systems (1).

New institutionalism is a response to the behavioural revolution and seeks to be theoretical and explanatory, where Old was not; also criticizing Old for the comparison, which is not enough explanatory for differences, where norms, rules and path dependency is. Old has been criticized of being biased, since it does not see what's outside of their own field of view – they are restricted to itself (14). It is dependent on the institution at hand.⁵ This also includes being able to study how institutions emerge. New inst. was created as an result for the behaviour and rational choice

1 All references of page numbers in parenthesis is to that page in Peters' book, if not otherwise stated.

2 The two approaches should be seen as “complementary rather than competitive explanations” (2).

3 Also “the State”, says Peters, means a “[virtually] metaphysical entity which embodies the law and the institutions of government, et somehow also transcends those entities.” (6).

4 Later, while referring to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and others, Peters presents them as the roots of political science and it's study of “analysis and design of institutions” (4).

theories. While old inst focused on the institution more solo, new looked at it for how it affected it's members, as well as other institutions. It looked at institutions more like an ecosystem of which society was constructed, or the result, of. But mostly it looks at the affect it has on it's members – it theorized that institutions has a much greater effect than previously studied. This because of the wave of behaviouralism and rational choice theory, previously popular. It looks more closely on how institutions interact, affecting members and society. Hence New inst. Includes informal institutions where Old does not (4).⁶ Institutions are social constructions, therefore it also affects social behaviour in turn. Institutions shape the behaviour of its members, of agents. It does, however, do this in different ways depending on perspective of the institution.

*Normative institutionalism*⁷ argues that the rules and norms of an institution affects the behaviour of its members, or actors. These 'guides' the behaviour and actions of the actors. But such a guide will also let actors become constrained to the obligations of the norms and rules of the institution. Political values comes from the institution – such as the family, religion or work environment – and individual preferences are shaped by their involvement with institutions (25-27). As an example I would say Correctional departments (Kriminalvården). It is of major importance that they follow rules and act by their guides/manuals, acting appropriately towards the clients, not allowing anyone to act anyone differentially from another – the set of values to follow (43).

In contrast, *Rational choice institutionalism* assumes that the individual seeks to maximize one's utility, rather than following the norms and rules on an institution.⁸ This is the primary motivation of joining institutions. It is a much more individualistic approach, with more distinct actors, from Normative, which argues that values are formed by the institution (48). However, the actors are still constrained by their institution membership, and they still will have to accept existing norms and rules – even before the formal entry. Behaviour is governed by a calculation of that maximizes utility and benefit. Actions and behaviour made in a situation is based on what is best for maximising utility. Examples would be bureaucratic organizations in government (55), or fishing collectives (Ostrom, 2005).

Historical institutionalism only looks backwards and is certainly the most descriptive of them all because of this. Only after the institution is created and exist, it can be described and understood such as is.⁹ The choices made during the initial construction phase sticks, and influences policy in

5 Going back to Aristotle and his students, one would argue that New would accommodate the preference of the observer is limited by the institutions the observer oneself is part of. Therefore New seeks to leave this normative approach behind as bias, and instead highlighting the importance of including the norms and rules of an institution.

6 Formal being the “formal aspects of government, including law” (4)

7 Which is the root of New institutionalism and comes from a sociological tradition(Ibid.25f).

8 Though this approach also oncludes the state and law and institutons that seek to maximize utility (47).

9 Which also includes the difficulty of explaining change (77).

the future (70). This is the concept of path dependency – that decisions stay and are hard to change (76); e.g. state constitutions and law. New institutional rules are often attempts to resolve problems that they in turn created (72) – e.g. trying to resolve old EU legislations with new directives, such as the Lisbon treaty (2007), amending the Maastricht treaty (1973), and the Treaty of Rome (1957). Instead these institutions are incremental adjusted – gradual change (80-81).

References

- Ostrom, E. (2005). *Understanding Institutional Diversity*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Peters, B. G. (2012). *Institutional Theory In Political Science: The ‘New Institutionalism’* (3rd ed.). London: Continuum.