

Seminar 1

General tips I

- Start preparing with questions
- Read and memorize your subject guide!
- Pay attention to all names the subject guide mentions, even in passing!
- Subject guide is not enough! Do the readings!
- Don't be trapped by the well-written subject guide!
- Always include basics in your answer
- Do not babble – get to the point!
- Use citations e.g., Hall and Taylor (1996) – last names and year, no need to memorize titles of articles

General tips II: structure of answer

- First sentence should include your answer!
- Definitions/ essence
- Strengths/weaknesses
- Criticism
- Criticism against criticism
- Examples from the real world
- Empirical evidence: what do data say?

General tips III: structure of answer

- Political Science is about trade-offs
- Trade off means that it is impossible to get all desirable outcomes at once
- There is often NO “ideal anything”
- ✓ No ideal method (appropriate for a research question)
- ✓ No ideal institutions (better or worse for certain political outcomes)
- Actors are rational: pursue self-interest
- Institutions are rules of game that affect outcomes

Video

- <http://www.upworthy.com/congress-did-something-so-spectacularly-creepy-that-its-too-unbelievable-to-make-up?g=2>

Possible Questions

- Are institutional approaches to political science superior to agency-based approaches?
- ‘Political agents are never free in their choices as they are always constrained by some institutional setting.’ Discuss.
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of rational choice theory.
- ‘Institutions are more important than behaviour in explaining political phenomena.’ Discuss.
- Are political outcomes better explained by the behaviour of political agents or by the design of political institutions?

Approach to answer

- Are institutional approaches to political science superior to agency-based approaches?
 - Acknowledging the role of both is the best approach, including limitations
 - Essence of each approach
 - Strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, criticism of assumptions
 - Synthesis of the behavioural and institutional approaches to explain different political outcomes in different polities and/or at different times is the product of political behaviour undertaken within certain institutional constraints, yet with the potential to reshape those same constraints.
 - Institutions and behavior are endogeneous
 - Examples how outcomes really are a product of both behaviour and institutions.

Approach to answer cont.

- The historical trend in political science starting with institutionalism and passing through behaviourism to culminate in an appreciation of their interdependency.
- Prisoners' Dilemma -> explanation of variable political outcomes.

Rational Choice Approach: recap

- Rationality
- Component Analysis
- Strategic Behavior

Rational Choice Approach: Rationality

- Acting rationally means in accordance with one's preferences
- Reasoned, not reasonable decisions
- Insight: individual rationality may not lead to optimal results
- 'Prisoners' dilemma'

Global Environment as Prisoners' Dilemma

		State A	
		Cut emissions	Don't cut emissions
State B	Cut emissions	+1,+1	-1,+2
	Don't cut emissions	+2,-1	0,0

Figure 1.2: Global environment emissions as a prisoners' dilemma game.

Component Analysis

- Simplicity (parsimony)
- Necessary to separate what to pay attention to from what to ignore
- Example: how resource curse impacts autocratic survival

Strategic interaction

- 2 voters: $C > B > A$
- Beliefs: A will win B by one vote, C will come 3rd no matter what
- Sincere voting versus strategic voting
- Sincere: vote for C (rational?)
- Strategic: vote for B
- Examples: language, driving
- People learn institutions and try to use them to their own advantage

Rational Choice Approach: Strengths

- Rationality assumption allows us “to talk in abstract terms about anonymous individual human beings or classes of human beings without the need for sui generis descriptions of each individual actor’s thoughts and beliefs.” (McCubbins and Thies, 2001) -> allows us to build theories and derive hypotheses that can be tested empirically
- Example: autocrats’ survival
- Component analysis allows us to explain at least one piece of interaction (while holding other things constant)
- Example: how natural resources affect autocrat’s survival
- Strategic behavior allows us to create model that are closer to reality because we take other peoples’ actions into account – “a little true-to-lifeness at the cost of further abstraction” (McCubbins and Thies, 2001)
- Example: modeling interaction between an autocrat and elites

Rational Choice Approach

- Why parties in two-party systems tend to converge on the average (median) voter
- Why interest groups who represent narrow economic interests tend to be more able to mobilise than interest groups who represent broad societal interests
- Why policy change is more difficult in presidential systems than in parliamentary systems
- Why coalition governments between parties with similar policy preferences can be as decisive as single-party governments
- Why some forms of governments lead to greater wealth redistribution than others.

Rational Choice Without Apology (McCubbins and Thies, 2001): reply to common criticism

- People are irrational
- ✓ Depends how you understand rationality
- ✓ Goals do not have to be rational (behavior does)
- ✓ What could happen **if** actors did behave rationally (Tsebelis, 1990)
 - Models are too abstract and oversimplified
- ✓ This reflects how people make decisions – they choose what to pay attention to and what not to
 - Strategic interaction – do people really calculate everything?
- ✓ No, but people do play games – driving, language
 - Failure to test empirically
- ✓ It is not failure of a theory. Maybe the method was wrong.

Criticism of rational choice approach (Green and Shapiro, 1994)

- Rational choice theory has produced nothing
- Rational theorists build theoretical models to fit empirical data: first observe an empirical pattern and then design model assumptions so that the model “predicts” the outcomes -> tautology!
- Fail to form empirically testable hypotheses, fail to test them, use irrelevant methods, obtain trivial results
- Engage in cherry-picking (selective use of the evidence)
- ✓ Contributions to environmental organizations (it exists, but too small?)
- Examples of phenomena that rational choice theorists fail to explain:
- ✓ Paradox of voting
- ✓ Collective action

Institutional Approach

- Outcomes do not depend only on preferences, but institutions, or rules of the game
- Formal (veto players)
- Informal (cultural fairness norms – “logic of appropriateness”)
- Path dependency – institutions tend to persist: if outcomes depend on humans’ preferences, they will not persist and change following change in preferences

Institutional Approach

- If it were a only a matter of preferences, all bills in the US Congress would be easily overturned by new majorities in a cycling manner
- But they are not
- Why?
- Because of institutions (e.g., committees and agenda power)

Institutional Approach

- If it were only about preferences, institutions, especially bad ones, wouldn't exist
- But they do... (institutions that promote corruption)
- Why?
- Because institutions are “humanly devised”, and rational actors devise institutions so that institutions benefit themselves

Criticism of institutionalism

- The definition of institution: Too broad? Non-falsifiable? What are rules of the game?
- Genesis and transformation of institutions: Where do they come from? How do they change?
 - If institutions shape interests, why are they formed in the first place? (critique to normative side)
 - If interests shape institutions, why are they stable over time? (critique to rational choice)

New institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996): institutions and behavior

Historical

- Take into account both calculus and culture
- Less specific about how institutions affect behavior
- “Organization is the mobilization of bias.”
- Emphasize path dependency

Sociological

- Concentrate on interpretations
- “Highly instrumental actor may be choosing strategies from culturally-specific repertoires”
- Starting point - existing institutions that provide templates for future institutions.
- Underestimate role of actors with their own stakes

Rational choice

- Concentrate on strategic calculus
- Very specific about how institutions affect behavior, but simplistic assumption of rationality
- Best at explaining why institutions persist, yet with its limits – origins & change
- ✓ Functionalist (in terms of effects)
- ✓ Intentionalist
- ✓ Voluntarist
- ✓ Starting point - equilibrium – why change then?