

Introduction to Political Science

Lectures 1 & 2

What is political science?

Fascinating world of politics

- Trumpism, Brexit, right-wing populism – why now?
- Cryptocurrencies – a bubble?
- Why democracies come and go?
- Why revolutions? Why they happen in one place, but not the other?
- What are political parties?
- Why in some countries political parties converge to the center, while in others – polarize?
- Why some organizations are more successful lobbyists than others?
- Why in some countries it takes 20 days to form government, while in others – 500?
- Why some societies are rich and other - poor?

What is political science?

- The **systematic** study of **observable** political phenomena by developing **theoretical explanations** and testing these explanations (**hypotheses**) through various **empirical** methods.
- Theory – why?
- Hypothesis – implication of theory?
- Example:
 - ✓ Theory: democracy enhances economic development ***because*** its politicians are accountable
 - ✓ Hypothesis: all else equal, increase in democracy score leads to high economic growth

The history of the discipline

- Politics as a separate area of study <- phenomenon of the 20th century. Before it was studied along with philosophy, history, law, sociology and economics
- First political scientists - normative questions about ideal institutions, e.g. Is the German system of government better than the British?
- Collapse of democracy in much of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s -> shift to behavior

Behavioral Revolution

- The WWII and Cold War -> need for political science analysis
- Improvement in methods: use of more sophisticated empirical research techniques
- Against atheoretical, descriptive research

Behavioral Revolution

- 1940s and the 1960s
- New data from opinion polls
- Survey research techniques, interview methods, statistical analysis
- Two traditions:
 - ✓ Rational choice scholars: explain behaviour of voters, parties, interest groups, legislators or bureaucrats
 - ✓ Sociologists: social and cultural determinants of behaviour to explain formation of states, behaviour of political parties, stable democracies

New Institutionalism

- 1980s and early 1990s
- Synthesis of two traditions:
- ✓ How institutional rules and procedures shape actors' interaction is more nuanced than formal models
- ✓ Political institutions also shape culture and society

The modern political science 'toolkit'

1. Political behavior: Beliefs and actions of political actors, based on their interests and political preferences.

- Who are political actors? Citizens, voters, party leaders, members of parliaments, government ministers, judges, civil servants, or members of interest groups.

2. Political institutions: Structures within which political behavior takes place - such as governments, regimes, systems (presidential vs. parliamentary, federal vs. unitary etc)

3. Political outcomes: A broad range of issues, from specific policy outcomes such as economic growth or higher public spending or better protection of the environment, to broader political phenomena, such as political and economic equality, social and ethnic harmony, or satisfaction with democracy and government.

Approaches in comparative politics

Rational choice approach

The rational choice theory

- The method of economics in the study of politics
- A similar idea about state interests dates back many years - rational choice applies this to individuals.
- Basic assumptions of the theory:
 1. An individual acts rationally in pursuit of their own self-interest. Individuals seek to maximize their gains and minimize their losses.
 2. People respond to incentives.
 3. An individual has sufficient information to establish their preferences.
 4. Preferences are transitive. (If an individual prefers A over B, and B over C, then it logically follows that he prefers A over C.)

The main characteristics

1) Rationality assumption

- “People make reasoned decisions to reach their goals, irrespective of what their specific goals may be” (McCubbins and Thies, p.3).
- Rationality refers to pursuit of pleasure/happiness and avoidance of pain.
- Behavior is instrumental. The goals do not have to be rational, but behavior does. It is an instrument in trying to reach these goals. So, the intent of behavior is important rather than its success, since people make mistakes.
- People can rank their wants/needs: utility function/maximization.

The main characteristics

2) Component analysis

- Simplification and abstraction are necessary to understand complex phenomena.
- ✓ Example: how natural resources affect autocrat's survival
- Tries to capture the essential elements of the relationship. Ignores the trivial elements.
- Uses spatial models - relative positioning of attitudes.

The main characteristics

3) Strategic behavior and games

- The interaction between people can alter their behavior accordingly.
- People realize that other people's behavior will affect their pursuit of self-interest in the longer run. They cannot always act alone, because all others are also acting out of self-interest.
- "Behavior that looks suboptimal in the short run is designed to accomplish a person's objectives in the longer run".

The prisoner's dilemma

		ACTION OF SUSPECT 2	
		Quiet	Talk
ACTION OF SUSPECT 1	Quiet	-1, -1	-3, 0
	Talk	0, -3	-2, -2

Players' choices:

Two people are arrested who are suspected of committing a crime and are interrogated separately.

Optimal outcome – if both stay quiet

BUT: If PI 1 stays quiet, and PI 2 talks, PI one is worse off!

Suboptimal outcome – both talk

Reiterated games when players know more about each other's strategy (interaction) change the results

The prisoner's dilemma

- Even if each player individually acts rationally, the collective outcomes is suboptimal.

Criticism against rational choice

- The assumptions about people are wrong
 - ✓ People are not always rational or self-interested. (Altruism - is it a different form of self-interest?)
 - ✓ People do not work with perfect information. (Asymmetrical information and bounded rationality)
 - ✓ Does every individual act the same way under the same incentives? Can't they alter their environment?
- Poor empirical record, does not stand empirical testing
- If interests shape institutions, why are institutions stable over time? Especially bad institutions?

Institutional approach

Institutionalism

- «Institutions are the *rules* of the game in a society or, more formally, are the *humanly devised* constraints that shape human *interaction*. In consequence they structure *incentives* in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic» (Douglas North, 1990: p. 3).
- Formal institutions matter
- ✓ Veto players
 - Informal institutions matter– cultural norms, “logic of appropriateness”, fairness norms
- ✓ Divide a dollar game: if Player 2 accepts the proposal, the money is divided between the two players as proposed by Player 1. But, if Player 2 rejects the proposal, neither player receives any money.
- Path dependency

Traditional (old) institutionalism

- One of the oldest approaches in the study of politics. Concerns itself with formal rules, organizations and structures of the government.
 - Focuses on historical narratives. Mainly descriptive, limited role for theorizing.
 - Critiques against old institutionalism (Peters 1999: 6-11)
- ✓ Normative
 - ✓ Historicist
 - ✓ Legalist
 - ✓ Holistic

New institutionalism

- 1. From a focus on organizations to a focus on rules:** Political institutions are no longer equated with political organizations, they are seen as a 'set of rules' that guide and constrain the behavior of actors.
- 2. From a formal to an informal conception of institutions:** Informal rules/procedures can coexist with formal rules and influence the agents (e.g. taking money in Colombia specifically for robbers!).
- 3. From a static to dynamic conception of institutions:** Institutions are processes. They are 'sticky', but the rules can change with the context and actor interests.

New institutionalism

4. **From submerged values to a value-critical stance:** Instead of establishing values for a universal concept of “good government” , the focus is on identifying the societal values which shape and are shaped by institutions.
5. **From a holistic to a differentiated conception of institutions:** Instead of describing whole systems of government, new institutionalists focus on components. (e.g. electoral system, tax regime, cabinet decision-making, etc.)
6. **From independence to embeddedness:** Political institutions are embedded in context. They are not secluded from time and space.

Criticism against 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?
 - ✓ How do they change?
- Are institutionalism and rational choice approaches compatible?

Rational Choice Institutionalism

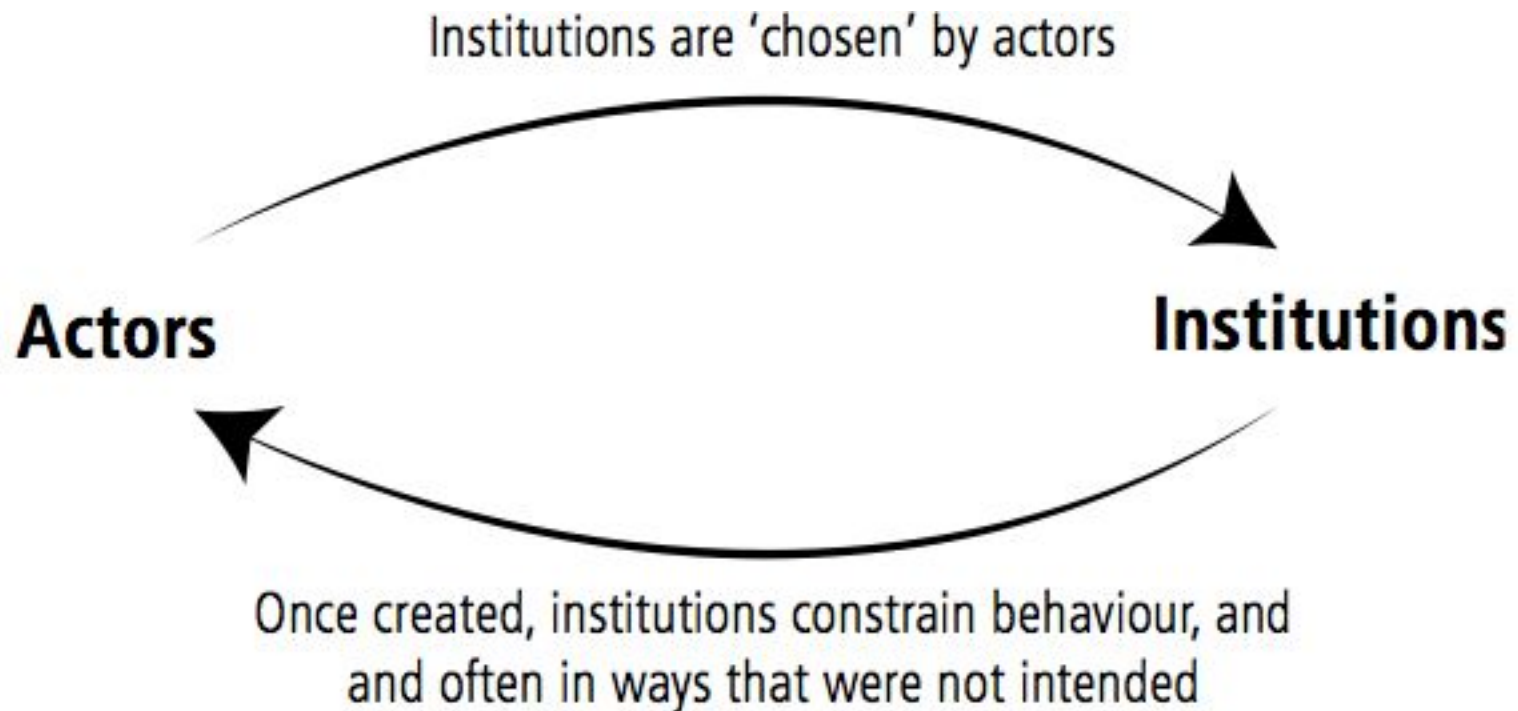


Figure 1.3: Interaction of actors and institutions.

Electoral College in the US

- Formal body in the US to elect President and VP
- Number of electors in each state= Senate+House of Representatives
- “It was created to strengthen the agrarian elite, offer more federal power to slaveholding states, and counterbalance factionalism and polarization”
- Americans moving to cities -> high distortion of votes
- ✓ “Individual Wyoming vote weighs 3.6 times more than an individual Californian’s vote”

Katy Collin, 2016, Washington Post-Monkey Cage

Fundamental equation of politics

Preferences*Institutions
=Outcomes

Charles Plott, 1991