Introduction

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About the Book

In this book we provide a new and distinctive introduction to the study of comparative politics. Most existing textbooks in this field tend to present either, comparative descriptions of political processes and systems in a variety of different countries or focus on methodological issues involved in 'doing' comparative analysis. As such, these texts generally omit an adequate introduction to the major theoretical traditions in contemporary political science and thus to the development of skills in comparative explanation.

Our focus is on an explicitly theoretical analysis built around a variety of approaches that may usefully be grouped together under the label of the 'new institutionalism', which is one of the most important developments in contemporary political science. As this is so crucial to the raison d'être for our book it is worth spending some time in exploring its basis, before going on in Chapter 1 to discuss in detail the theoretical variants of institutionalism we regard as especially useful to an explanation of comparative politics, which are, broadly speaking structural, cultural and rational choice interpretations.

The 'New Institutionalism'

Steinmo, in his contribution to *The Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought* (Clark and Foweraker, 2007), suggests that institutions are the foundation of all types of political behaviour. In this analysis, institutions are seen essentially as sets of 'rules' which are either formal, as in the case of cultural norms, or formal, as in the case of legal or constitutional rules. If we did not have such guiding principles, Steinmo asserts, we would be in a situation tantamount to a Hobbesian state of nature.

Institutions are also fundamental to the organisation and practice of political life since without them, we would be unable to understand: who is able to participate in politics; what their particular rights and obligations might be; or how we can influence policy outcomes. In other words, institutions shape all types of political action. They thus *matter* but we also need to ask *how* and *why* they matter. In answering these questions and coming up with explanations, it is helpful to have a series of lenses through which we can provide frameworks to guide our research. We thus need theoretical models.

However, assertions that political institutions are important are hardly new. Institutions have been seen as the stuff of politics for many generations. The first, systematic approach to political science in general in the 20th century was institutional in nature. However, it became recognised quite early in the period following the Second World War that what passed for analysis was largely description or narrative, lacked theoretical perspective and was essentially unscientific. As we shall mention in the case of the development of comparative politics (Chapter 2), changes brought about by behavioural approaches that focused on micro-levels of behaviour, enabled analysts to examine the behaviour of the mass public and facilitated the testing of theoretical models – or at least hypotheses. However, the use of such approaches in democratic states soon gave rise to criticism and unease among large sections of the political science community that suggested that the baby had surely been discarded along with the bathwater! Hence, the development of 'new' institutional approaches which sought to combine the more effective elements of both traditional institutionalism with beliefs in the essential role of theory and rigorous analysis propounded by behaviouralists. In other words, while *old* institutional approaches sought to *describe* political phenomena, *new* institutionalism seeks to *explain* them (Peters, 1996: 206).

March and Olsen (2006: 4–5), reflecting on their overall contribution to the debate on the role of institutions since 1984, suggest that institutions are 'collections of structures, rules and standard operating procedures that have a partly autonomous role in political life'. Furthermore, they are 'markers of a polity's character, history and visions. They provide the bonds that tie citizens together in spite of the many things that divide them' (2006: 4–5). Although some of this was evident in the thought of 'old' institutionalism, a further distinction among contemporary institutional approaches is that they accept the inevitability of change and development which incorporates a willingness to take on board not only elements learned from other theoretical and methodological outlooks but also to incorporate novel or difficult areas of policy which have not traditionally been associated with institutional analysis. Apter (1996) cites as examples immigration or the creation of an underclass resulting from a shrinking industrial base, which often exacerbate social conflict.

It is important to recognise some particular characteristics of the new institutionalism. First, it is not a monolithic movement. There are several variants which, as March and Olsen indeed suggest, although sharing a basic belief in the nature and importance

of institutions, nevertheless 'focus attention on different aspects of political life, on different explanatory factors, and on different strategies for improving political systems' (2006: ??). These three essential 'perspectives' focus on institutional factors (or structures) cultural communities, governed by particular norms of behaviour and a belief that individuals are rational actors who operate according to their own self-interest. This indeed represents the basic stuff of our approach and will be examined in detail in Chapter 1.

In addition to this, we need to recognise that whereas 'old' institutional approaches focused simply on 'formal, structural aspects of institutions' (Peters, 1996: 206), the newer variants also take account of the actual behaviour of institutions. This is an aspect which has been developed from behavioural approaches and is exemplified by regarding the institution(s) under scrutiny as 'dependent' variables, explained by other factors, rather than as simply entities with particular characteristics.

Additionally, there is a deliberate attempt within the new institutionalism to give attention to outcomes of institutional behaviour. In other words, rather than concentrate on procedures operated by institutions, as older variants did, concern with what results from these procedures is seen as equally – if not more – important. Thus, rather than simply concentrate on 'how' legislation is enacted; there is recognition that outcomes, this is, legislation, have consequences for society as a whole and its individual citizens. Policy outcomes can have definite effects in changing the political behaviour of citizens, as we can see from decisions by governments of certain countries, notably the USA and the UK, to go to war in Iraq in 2003, or to support the war effort. Many individual citizens disagreed with this and consequently changed their votes at ensuing elections, for example in the UK, Germany and Spain.

New institutionalists, irrespective of whether they favour a rational or structural approach, nevertheless accept that a political order is indeed far from static and that institutions change over time as a result of many factors or influences. However, as March and Olsen inter alia have pointed out, change is also a function of the specific nature of the institutions in question and cannot simply be brought about on the basis of a whim. They are dependent on changing rules that are entrenched and a reflection of local historical and cultural development. This often leads to inconsistency and even inefficiency in the behaviour of the institution and is usually carried out as a reaction to events rather than as part of an overall, strategic plan.

Overall therefore, following the parameters suggested by March and Olsen (2006), new institutionalists believe that:

- Rules and practices, which are socially constructed, govern the lives of all political actors.
- Such rules may constrain or enable action and hence affect the governing capacity of the political system.

- These rules are known and largely accepted. They provide for codes of appropriate behaviour and
- Political institutions, on the basis of these rules are able to set out the rights and duties of citizens and engage in the authoritative allocation of advantages and burdens for citizens. Political institutions can also act authoritatively to regulate in disputes and conflicts.
- Institutions provide for order and stability.

The main difference between the new institutionalism and other approaches, however, is that it takes as its basic unit of analysis, institutional rules, identities, norms and procedures rather than individuals or whole countries and seeks to be realistic in its assumptions. As such it takes on board satisfactory concepts derived other approaches rather than rejecting them. In this way it enhances the knowledge pool and analytic viability of comparative politics, and indeed, of political science in general. This book will demonstrate how this works in relation to specific political institutions and actor. We will now look at the outline structure of rest of the book and indicate the nature of the content of the individual chapters.

Part 1: Theory and Method in Comparative Politics

Chapter 1: theory, institutions and the new institutionalism

The guiding chapter by Mark Pennington discusses how comparative politics as a discipline aims to provide explanations of the similarities and differences in decision-making practices that may be observed in different political regimes. Within this context considerable emphasis is placed on the notion of institutional analysis. Similarities and differences in the 'inputs' and 'outputs' of the political process are linked to the role that institutions play in structuring flows of power and resources in different political systems. The renewed emphasis on institutional analysis has been encapsulated by the growing interest in the so-called 'new institutionalism'. The 'new institutionalism' is, however, a far from united set of theoretical positions. While sharing a recognition that institutions are important, there are major differences between historical/structural analyses, cultural analyses and rational choice variants of institutional analysis. This first chapter will introduce the 'new institutionalism' and the competing modes of explanation covered by this umbrella term.

Questions to be addressed include: What is an institution? What is the significance of institutional analysis to comparative politics? What does it mean to think in terms of 'paradigms', 'approaches', 'frameworks' and schools of thought? What are the key differences between the structural/historical, cultural and rational choice variants of institutional analysis?

Chapter 2: methodologies for comparative politics

Just as political scientists differ in their accounts of the role that institutions play in structuring political life, so too do differences emerge with regard to the methodological tools appropriate to comparative analysis. Some scholars prefer to make causal inferences through the use of large-scale statistical analysis, while others prefer the use of comparative case studies, and still others opt for the notion of 'thick description'. This chapter by Judith Bara introduces the major tools of comparative analysis using examples of published research to highlight differences between methodological approaches with which the different schools of comparative institutional analysis are or are not associated with a particular way of 'doing research'. On a more general level, the chapter considers broader questions pertaining to the rigour of research and the appropriate standards for drawing causal inferences in the social sciences.

Among the questions relating to this area are: How do political scientists go about the business of 'comparison'? What are the major differences between qualitative and quantitative traditions in comparative research? What are the rationales for the use of large-scale statistical analysis, focused case studies, and 'thick' descriptions? What problems might we encounter in undertaking comparative analysis?

Part 2: Institutions

Chapter 3: the nation-state and nationalism

The nation state has long been a central concern of political scientists given the centrality of this unit of power to political life. The formation of the nation-state, however, and its functions continue to be highly contested topics within political science. Brendan O'Duffy examines the significance of the nation state and the ways in which the different branches of institutional analysis conceptualise it's role as a political institution. Attention will focus on disputes between those who view the state as an historical response to technological and economic change, those who associate the nation state as a reflection of shared cultural traditions and theorists who conceive of the nation-state as a mechanism for overcoming collective action problems.

Relevant questions include: What are the functions of the modern nation-state? To what extent are nation-states co-terminous with national identities? How does the experience of nationalism vary between states? To what extent is the character of nation-states being challenged by the growth of supranational entities such as the European Union? How do structural/historical, cultural and rational choice analyses differ in their accounts of nationalism and the role of the nation-state?

Chapter 4: electoral systems

The electoral system is considered to be the most easily manipulated part of a constitution. As Jocelyn Evans demonstrates, understanding how different electoral systems operate, therefore, and understanding how different electoral systems may affect other parts of the political process is an essential component of comparative institutional analysis. This chapter outlines some important questions associated with alternative electoral systems, including the effect on parties in the legislature, and the strength, stability and accountability of the governing party/coalition. These issues will be examined through an institutionalist lens, focusing on differing conceptions of the role and effects of electoral processes.

Questions pertinent to this topic include: How strong is the relationship between the electoral system and the number of parties? Are governments elected under single member, district electoral systems stronger, more stable and more accountable than those under proportional representation systems? Is there a link between electoral systems and the character of legislative/executive relations? Do electoral systems affect the overall structure of decision-making in society? Are electoral systems a reflection of different cultural attributes or do they contribute to the shaping of such attributes? To what extent do different electoral systems affect incentives to vote?

Chapter 5: legislatures and executives

The division of power and responsibility between the legislature and the executive is one of the most important institutional variables that distinguishes between states. Catherine Needham explores the nature of legislatures and executive, focusing especially on variations in the relationship between assemblies and the executive, particularly in terms of degrees of parliamentary autonomy in the legislative process and the significance of legislative executive power relations to the broader political process. The chapter will show how the structural, cultural and rational variants of institutional analysis conceptualise this relationship.

Questions to be addressed include: How does parliamentary autonomy differ between different states? What are the competing justifications for unicameral and bicameral systems? What roles do parliamentary committees play and how does their importance vary between states? What is the significance of legislative/executive relations from the different perspectives?

Chapter 6: the bureaucracy

Bureaucrats and civil servants are key actors involved in the design and implementation of public policy in most contemporary states. These actors, therefore, have significant political power and influence.

As the extent of government intervention in the economy has grown over the last century, concerns have risen over the increasing degree of power that is concentrated in bureaucratic agencies. Such concerns have arguably been intensified with the rise of international bureaucratic agencies embodied in the European Union and organisations such as the World Trade Organization. Mark Pennington examines the role of the public bureaucracy from an institutionalist perspective focusing on the analysis of bureaucratic power from structural, cultural and rational choice perspectives.

Important questions to be dealt with include: How and why do the scope and functions of bureaucracies differ between states? How and why is the bureaucracy able to exercise power over legislators? How do rational/public choice accounts of bureaucratic power differ from structuralist and cultural interpretations? What are the mechanisms that can be used to check bureaucratic power?

Chapter 7: the courts

In this chapter David Robertson introduces the theme of the rule of law and how it is institutionalised in the political system, in part through the judicial process. The focus of the analysis will be on the judiciary as interpreters of law and the political economy of judicial decisions. The chapter will consider the role of the judicial politics in the governmental process, and address questions of judicial independence and judicial review.

Questions of relevance include: What are the links between constitutionalism, the rule of law and democracy? How independent are judiciaries from other branches of government? In what ways do judiciaries mediate the relationship between state and society? To what extent can judicial decisions be thought of as a process of structural domination, cultural evolution or rational choice?

Chapter 8: the territorial dimension

Although the nation-state is often the prime mover in the political affairs of modern societies, the character in which political power is exercised within nation-states varies considerably from country to country. As Brendan O'Duffy shows, in some states power is diffused quite widely to lower level government agencies at the local level (federalism) while in others the distribution of authority tends to be more centralised. This chapter will examine degrees of centralisation and decentralisation in selected states, theories that have sought to explain and/or to justify differing levels of centralisation/de-centralisation in governance structures, and the significance of such debates to comparative institutional analysis.

Questions to be addressed encompass: What is meant by the term federalism? What are the primary differences between federal and unitary states? Why is the territorial division of power important from an institutionalist point of view? What are the

implications for federalist theory of the rise of supranational bodies such as the European Union? How can debates about centralisation and decentralisation be analysed in structural, cultural and rational choice terms?

Part 3: Actors

Chapter 9: voters, parties and participation

In recent years, many authors have pointed to trends, which suggest a shift away from electoral participation towards other forms of political activity – such as social movements and even direct action. It is important, therefore, to define precisely what affects the choices that people make in terms of how they express their political views. Judith Bara explores some of these themes and emphasises the institutional factors that may affect the extent to which people in different contexts do or do not vote and if they do, how they exercise their vote.

Among the many questions relating to this subject are: How does political participation differ from electoral participation? Why do people vote or not vote? What are the key debates in political science with regard to the significance of 'class based' voting, 'pocket book' voting and 'cultural change' in voters' outlooks? Why has voting behaviour become more volatile in recent years?

Chapter 10: interest groups and social movements

Interest groups continue to be a major forum for political participation in many states. This chapter will explore what is meant by the term 'interest group' in political science and the factors that may affect the power wielded by such groups. Mark Pennington also considers how the different branches of new institutionalism analyse the role of political institutions in structuring the context in which groups mobilise and attempt to exert political power.

Questions to be addressed will include: What is meant by the term interest group? How, if at all, do interest groups differ from 'social movements'? What is meant by the term 'interest group power'? How do institutions affect the capacity of interest groups and social movements to exert power? How do structural, cultural and rational choice theories of institutions differ in their analysis of interest group politics?

Chapter 11: political leaders

It has become increasingly obvious that political leaders have become a major focus of attention for academic observers, the media and indeed the public at large. Indeed,

leaders are often seen as the supreme representatives of their country, responsible for the shaping of policy and often institutions too. This chapter by David S. Bell will theorise whether or not significant variations in leadership exist in practice and how we can best develop tools to compare them. This chapter also demonstrates that it is not always possible to theorise specific elements in the political universe by using exactly the same theoretical models which may be appropriate to the analysis of roles played by other institutional actors.

Questions to be addressed will include: Is 'personality' a realistic variable to utilise in the process of explanation of political process or institutional arrangements? How can this be explained by different theoretical perspectives?

The discussion concludes with a short 'afterword'. This draws together some of the themes introduced earlier and reprises how the three major paradigms operate in their different ways in aiding our understanding of the political universe.