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CHAPTER 2

POLITICS AS A PROCESS STRUCTURED IN SPACE AND TIME

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WHAT do we see when we look at the political world across space and time? In large measure, that depends on what we are looking for and the lens through which we look. This is as true of political science today as it was of seventeenth-century scientists looking for phlogiston through rudimentary microscopes. Our methods and assumptions about what we should see, notably about causal structures in the world, condition what we find. In this chapter, I consider the value of seeing politics as a process that is structured across space and time, a perspective closely associated with historical institutionalism.

Analysts working within this school of thought have long been interested in the issue of how politics might be structured across space and time. Their initial formulations were inspired by a reaction against behavioral models that saw politics as interest group conflict, sometimes conditioned by political culture, but largely unmediated by institutional structures (Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992). Historical institutionalists brought the state back in as an institutional field capable of structuring, as well as responding to, group conflict; and, under the influence of research on neo-corporatism, they went on to argue that the institutional structures organizing capital and labor condition such conflict, giving rise to national or regionally specific patterns of action and policy (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Goldthorpe 1984; Hall 1986; Immergut 1998; Thelen 1999). These analyses provided influential explanations for many types of phenomena in comparative politics and international relations, and subsequent work has expanded the optic to include a range of ways in which other institutions and ideas might structure politics.

In minimalist terms, to say that politics is a structured process is simply to suggest that the behavior of political actors and the outcomes of political conflict are conditioned, not only by variables whose values change fluidly across time and space, but

also by factors that are relatively stable for discrete periods and often divergent across cases. Thus, it highlights certain kinds of context effects (Falleti and Lynch 2009; Goertz 1994). To take such an approach means embracing models of the polity that acknowledge the impact on political action of the social, economic, and political structures in which actors are embedded at a particular time or place and considering how events not only affect the immediate outcome of interest but also restructure the institutional or ideological setting in ways that condition outcomes in later periods of time. One of the principal contributions of historical institutionalism has been to draw our attention to the structural dimensions of political analysis.

In this chapter I outline the limitations of alternative views of politics and consider what it means to see politics as a process structured across space and time with an emphasis both on macro-structures and on the micro-foundations of such an approach. I then take up one of the principal dilemmas generated by such a perspective, which has been thrown into sharp relief by a second wave of work in historical institutionalism, namely, the problem of explaining how institutions that are to some extent plastic can nonetheless contribute to the structuring of the political world. The chapter closes with some overarching conclusions about the importance of looking for patterns in politics.

THE ALTERNATIVE VIEW

Many features of political science today militate against seeing politics as a structured process. In the study of comparative politics, for instance, an alternative posture is encouraged by the popularity of panel-based estimation techniques with cross-national and time-series components. Such techniques are appealing because they allow for statistical estimations in cross-national settings where the relevant number of country cases is small. However, these estimation techniques encourage assumptions about the structure of causal relations that militate against seeing politics as a process that is structured by context effects specific to particular places or by various kinds of syncopation in time. That is because those techniques imply unit homogeneity, namely, that, *ceteris paribus*, a change of the same magnitude in the independent variable will produce the same change in the dependent variable in all cases, and that the most relevant *ceteris* are indeed *paribus*, namely all the factors impinging on both the outcome and the explanatory variables have been fully specified in the estimation.

Although a limited number of period and interaction effects can be included in such estimations, in practice, they rarely are. It is difficult, for instance, to include the impact of institutions that are stable over long periods of time or interaction effects operating in some periods but not others. Thus, as they are typically used, these techniques imply a political world in which outcomes are driven by a relatively small set of causal factors operating largely independently of one another and with consistent causal force across space and time. Their popularity promotes images of the polity as a homogenous plane, without historical texture, in which ancillary institutional or ideological developments

are relatively unimportant and the fundamental determinants of political action are broadly universal in form.

For example, studies that ask whether levels of social spending are driven by the partisan complexion of government often construe political parties as actors with a consistent identity over time. Some assume that all political parties on the left or right of the political spectrum can be treated as equivalent units regardless of the country or context in which they operate. Social democracy is often seen as a homogenous force operating in the same way across space and time (Brady et al. 2003). Similar assumptions are made about important economic factors, such as levels of economic openness. The usual presumption is that a given increase in exposure to trade has the same effect on redistribution in 1966, say, as it does in 2006 and equivalent impact regardless of the country in which it is occurring.¹

In some instances, these are defensible assumptions, but they militate against investigation into the context effects that structure the impact of a variable in particular places or times; and they neglect the possibility that the most important impact of a key economic or political event may derive, not from its immediate effects on the outcome of interest, but from the ways in which it restructures the institutional or ideological setting, thereby affecting outcomes in later periods of time. The seminal work of Pierson (2004) draws our attention to this point.

To take a simple illustration, suppose we are interested in the impact of a shift from Conservative to Labour governance on British social or economic policy. We might assess that by calculating the average effects of a shift in governance based on the values taken by indicators for these policies under Labour and Conservative governments throughout the post-war period. For some purposes, that may be useful. But, as the person who is drowning in a river that averages three feet deep soon realizes, such observations hide as much as they reveal. Will that technique generate adequate explanations for what a Labour government does when it takes office in 1945 as compared with one taking office in 1997? In principle, this approach assumes they will do roughly the same thing. In fact, the policies of those two Labour governments were radically different because of variation in key features of historical context, including the ideological frameworks and institutional practices current at each juncture. How well do we understand the impact of Labour governance without taking such factors into account?

In this regard, it is instructive to compare how contemporary analyses treat the impact of changes in the international economy on levels of public spending with Cameron's (1978) analysis of such issues. Many recent studies look for annual changes in spending in response to annual changes in international capital flows or exposure to trade—often to conform to the requirements of panel-based estimations (Garrett 1995; Alderson and Nielsen 2002). We can question whether the lag-structure in such specifications models even the immediate effects of economic integration in plausible terms (Iversen and Cusack 2000). However, these models also neglect the possibility that the most important consequences of economic openness may flow from its structural effects on the economic or institutional environment that show up only over the long term. For instance, Cameron argues that the principal effect on public spending of increasing international

economic integration at the turn of the twentieth century operated via the ways in which it altered the structure of the political economy. He argues that integration fostered forms of industrial concentration, which encouraged the development of more powerful trade unions and employers associations, thereby encouraging a neo-corporatist politics favorable to the expansion of public spending in subsequent decades (see also Katzenstein 1985).

Cameron's analysis may not be correct in all respects, but it reveals types of causal paths missed by studies that do not consider how economic or political developments shift the basic structures within which political contestation takes place (Pierson 2004). In the contemporary literature, politics is often presented as a process driven by small sets of variables of timeless importance operating relatively independently of each other and with the same effect regardless of historical context. There is some value in looking for such "portable truths" that apply, in principle, across all times and places (Campbell 1975; Przeworski and Teune 1970). But there is also a case for approaching politics as a field structured across space and time.

SEEING POLITICS AS A STRUCTURED PROCESS

What does it mean to view politics as a process structured across space and time? Seeing politics as a structured process entails operating from models of the polity that acknowledge the most important social, economic, and political structures in which actors are embedded, the interaction effects generated by these structures, and the corresponding variation across space and time to which such effects give rise. These models do not give up the aspiration to generality central to social science, but emphasize the importance of securing *effective* generalizations, namely, ones that incorporate relevant interaction effects into assessments of the impact of the explanatory variables and specify with care the scope conditions relevant to the analysis, defined partly in terms of the presence of such structural factors.

The broader literature in comparative politics already provides evidence that politics is structured *across space*, by types of welfare states and varieties of capitalism (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hall and Soskice 2001; Amable 2003). The power resources approach to redistribution, for instance, sees class relations as structural features of a polity that evolve to structure politics differently across countries (O'Connor and Olsen 1998). There is also widespread recognition that politics is structured *across time*. It is now widely accepted, for instance, that the politics of social policy has been different in the post-industrial era than it was in the industrial era (Iversen and Wren 1998; Pierson 2001). It is but a short step from such observations to the acknowledgment that, when social democratic parties move into government, the results may be different in 1997 than they were in 1945. There is a case for inquiring more deeply into how such

structures shift over time. As Pierson (2004) has noted, we miss much of what explains political outcomes if we do not take into account these “big, slow-moving processes.”

When considering how politics might be structured, at issue are, not only the macro-structures of politics, but the adequacy of the micro-foundations we employ. One of the most prevalent approaches in political science adopts what might be described as a Schumpeterian set of micro-foundations. From this perspective, political actors are seen as atomistic and calculating individuals, endowed with certain resources, but connected to others mainly by strategic interaction driven by efforts to coordinate so as to secure more resources. Models built on such assumptions can be highly revealing, especially about the ways in which institutions condition coordination (Shepsle 2006).

However, as economists now recognize, the assumptions of such a model fly in the face of a century of empirical findings in psychology, anthropology, and sociology (Elster 2007). Although riven by debates, those disciplines are united on at least one point. They all see human beings, not as atomistic individuals connected only by strategic interaction, but as relational actors deeply connected to one another by social networks, organizational structures, common practices, and shared meaning systems, which influence them in multifaceted ways (Hall and Lamont 2013).

To accept the import of this point, we do not have to adopt the view of Foucault (1970) that the actors themselves are constituted by such structures or Althusser’s (1971) contention that actors are subjects of ideology because it is ideology that allows them to be acting subjects (Clemens and Cook 1999). It would be a step forward to observe that the ideas common to a community of discourse are likely to influence how an actor interprets the proposals she receives, much as the particular set of political parties she is offered influences her strategic calculations about which one to support. To see political actors as relational actors implies *ipso facto*, that their actions cannot be explained without reference to multiple dimensions of the relations in which they are embedded. Although scholars have developed sophisticated formulations about such structures, ranging from Marxian concepts of class (Giddens 1973; Parkin 1974) to Bourdieu’s (1977) theories of practice, virtually all such formulations refer to three constitutive elements of the connections between actors. These are institutional practices, shared cognitive frameworks, and network relations.

Institutional practices can be defined as regularized routines with a rule-like quality in the sense that the actors expect the practices to be observed (Hall and Thelen 2009, 9). Institutions connect actors because they reflect and depend on mutual expectations. They may be formal, if codified by the relevant authorities, or informal, which is to say observed by mutual agreement. They may, but need not, be backed by sanctions. So defined, this category encompasses a wide variety of institutions, ranging from those associated with marriage to those regulating wage bargaining. The core point is that actors do not wander aimlessly in the world. They negotiate their way through the transactions of each day by means of institutional practices. Therefore, we cannot explain their actions without reference to these practices.

Shared cognitive frameworks are sets of ideas with implications for action. They may be normative, thereby carrying prescriptive power, or cognitive, in the sense that they

describe how various features of the world work. Goldstein and Keohane (1993) distinguish between *worldviews* composed of the conceptual building blocks of possibility, *principled beliefs*, specifying what is right and wrong, and *causal beliefs* describing how effects follow from causes. These frameworks are reflected in symbolic representations and shared narratives as well as other forms of discourse. They condition collective as well as individual action in realms as diverse as those of environmental movements and international monetary policymaking (Bouchard 2003; Poletta 2006; McNamara 1999).

Network relations are composed of the ties people have to others by virtue of regular contact or communication with them. These relations may be informal or organized by sets of rules. Thus, I include organizations under this rubric as well as networks in which interaction is more informal. Multiple dimensions of network relations condition their impact, including the number and character of their members, the frequency of contact between them, the depth and content of mutual knowledge such contacts convey, and the density or location of their nodes of interaction (Scott 1988; Wellman and Berkowitz 2006). Networks condition capacities for collective as well as individual action in many spheres ranging from the management of childcare to the coordination of international regulation (Eberlein and Newman 2008; Padgett and Powell 2012)

Although these three elements of social relations are conceptually separate, it should be apparent that their social force often derives from how they operate in tandem. Network relations are often consequential because of the cognitive frameworks they promote (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). What organizations induce people to do is dependent on the institutional practices they endorse (Meyer and Rowan 1977). By specifying the understandings that make mutual expectations possible, cognitive frameworks provide crucial underpinning for institutional practices (Chwe 2003). All three of these elements *structure* the interactions people have with each other, creating order out of behavior that might otherwise be shapeless or chaotic.

Just *how* these elements structure action is, of course, an issue at the heart of all perspectives on politics as a structured process. My objective is not to resolve that problem but to argue it deserves a central place in the problematics of political science. Politics should be approached with sensitivity to the multifaceted ways in which individuals are connected to one another. All too often, analysts fasten on one feature of the structures in which actors are embedded without regard for the ways in which other such features may be mediating its effects. Where the objective is to illustrate how one facet of such structures conditions action, this approach may be helpful. But, when the goal is to explain an important outcome, such as levels of inequality across nations or the policies that address it, where multiple structural effects are likely to be operating in tandem, to emphasize one without considering others may be misleading.

The value of seeing politics as thickly, rather than thinly, structured can be seen in the leverage it offers over issues of preference formation, a crucial topic in political science (Katznelson and Weingast 2007). Influenced by Schumpeterian models, political scientists often think of actors' preferences in binary terms. That is to say, actors are said to have a set of *fundamental preferences* generally seen as universal, such as preferences for more income or power, plus a set of *strategic preferences* over the choices they have to

make in any given situation.² Strategic preferences are usually said to be conditioned by the ways in which the institutional setting supports cooperation in contexts of strategic interaction. This formulation has generated revealing analyses about some of the ways in which institutions condition action. However, there is an increasingly obvious terrain between fundamental and strategic preferences, in which a good deal of preference formation takes place that is not well explained by such models. We understand reasonably well why an actor interested in increasing his income, who believes that a particular party program will do so, might vote for one party rather than another given a particular set of electoral rules. But current formulations do not tell us much about why that actor gives priority to increasing his income or why s/he believes one party is more likely to do so; yet those judgments are also crucial to the decision to choose one party over another.

Thus, we can advance our understanding of preference formation by incorporating more of the structural dimensions of politics into the analysis. Instead of assuming actors with narrow material interests that arise unambiguously from the world, we might posit actors with multiple goals, reflected in multivariate preference functions, who attach weights to each of those goals in the context of a decision situation. The process whereby those weights are attached can then be modeled as a function of salient features of the institutional, ideological or social context in which the actor is situated (Hall 2009). The preferences of workers over unemployment benefit schemes, for instance, may vary with the skill structures of national production regimes, and the positions taken by parties toward social security reform may be affected by their knowledge of foreign experience with such schemes (Iversen and Soskice 2001; Weyland 2008; Linos 2013). Cognitive frameworks popular in specific times and places can explain why an actor thinks one party program is more likely than another to advance his interests (Jacobs 2010; Berman 2001; McNamara 1999). We still have much to learn about how these dimensions of social relations impinge on such judgments. To do so, however, we have to begin from models of politics as a process structured in more ways than simple coordination models allow.

These observations are especially important to cross-national inquiry because nation-states generate distinctive institutional and ideological fields that persist over long periods of time. The institutional practices, cognitive frameworks and network relations characteristic of a country constitute something like its *social ecology*. This term implies that distinctive outcomes are often generated by *interaction* among various elements of social relations and the durability of some elements may depend on the presence of others. Absent an appropriate set of cognitive frameworks, for instance, it may be difficult to sustain certain types of institutions (Streeck 2009).

In short, in order to understand cross-national or regional variation in macro-outcomes, such as levels of inequality, redistribution, state intervention, social cohesion or democratic stability, there is a strong case for moving beyond explanations that turn on two or three dispositive variables toward analyses focused on the social ecologies of countries and how they are built. These analyses need not be abstruse or ornate. Their defining feature would be an effort to describe how politics is structured in each locality, attentive to how institutional practices, cognitive frameworks and

network relations interact. There are already some models for how that type of inquiry can enhance our understanding of comparative politics (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Pontusson 1988) and international relations (Fioretos 2011; Krotz and Schild 2013).

POLITICS STRUCTURED IN TIME

Of course, politics is structured not only in space but in time (Pierson 2004). By this, I mean that some outcomes may be more likely in some kinds of temporal contexts than in others and similar causal factors may have more impact in some periods than in others. There are at least two senses in which politics might be said to be structured in time.

The first emphasizes the distinctiveness of specific historical periods that follows from variation across them in the social ecology of political relations. At specific moments in time, politics may be structured by distinctive complexes of institutions, social networks or cognitive templates. The causal factors driving social policy, for instance, may differ from one era to another. This proposition calls into question images of politics as a seamless terrain in which variables operate with consistent force regardless of historical context and draws our attention to period effects.

However, there is a second sense in which politics may be structured over time, which puts less emphasis on the historical specificity of a given period and more on the general distinctions that can be drawn between different types of historical periods. Here the issue is whether history should be seen as a constant flux or as a syncopated process divided into different eras marked, for instance, by their relative openness to institutional or ideological change. Such distinctions are important because the kinds of causal factors driving politics might vary across each type of period.

Historical institutionalists have developed a number of formulations to describe how politics is structured over time. The two most influential are built on concepts of critical junctures and path dependence. Following Krasner's (1984) argument that politics reflects a "punctuated equilibrium," many scholars adopted the view that history can be divided into moments of critical juncture, when developments largely exogenous to institutions render those institutions more pliable, and intervening periods of stability, when the institutions established at critical junctures structure political outcomes (Collier and Collier 1991; Capoccia and Keleman 2007). To understand processes of institutional change running over longer periods, scholars devised conceptions of path dependence, based on the contention that positive feedback effects arising from the entrenched entitlements, coordination effects or network externalities generated by institutions alter the attractiveness of the options facing political actors profoundly enough to foreclose some paths of political development, while making movement along others more likely (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2004).

Over the past decade, however, deeper exploration of how institutions change has yielded a "second wave" of work in historical institutionalism—exemplified in the collective volumes of Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2009). This

second wave has been immensely fruitful. It provides more dynamic analyses of institutions attentive to historical context, generates a host of new propositions about how institutions evolve, and illuminates many of the intricate relationships between institutions and social coalitions. However, this new focus on institutional change has brought historical institutionalists face to face with a paradox: the more attention they devote to the factors that shape institutions, the more they call into question the power of institutions to shape politics (Riker 1980). We might call this the paradox of plasticity.

Three of the formulations advanced with great elegance by Streeck and Thelen (2005) bring this paradox into sharp relief. First, they suggest that institutions should be seen as active objects of political contestation and instruments in the hands of political actors, thereby calling into question the proposition that institutions structure politics in more fundamental ways than an instrument normally would (Streeck and Thelen 2005, 15). Some years ago, Geertz (1964) chastised political scientists for treating ideology in similar terms as a “mask or a weapon” rather than as a constitutive component of action

Second, Streeck and Thelen (2005, 22) observe that there are a multiplicity of institutions in every field, frequently layered on top of another (see also Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Thus, what actors can do is not tightly constrained by the range of available institutions. Instead, actors choose which institutions to use and mold them to their purposes. If institutions are so plentiful and plastic, however, it becomes difficult to understand why they should be seen as factors structuring behavior rather than simply as instruments in the hands of actors whose behavior is driven by something else.

In much the same way, the perspicacious acid of Streeck and Thelen’s (2005, 8, 18) analysis dissolves the conceptual frameworks used by earlier institutionalists to understand how politics is structured over time. They take issue with the notion that major institutional changes occur mainly at critical junctures, separated by periods of normal politics, in favor of the view that highly consequential institutional changes often result from incremental steps taken on a continuous basis (see also Palier 2005). This perspective is almost certainly correct, but it gives up the leverage that the critical junctures approach once had over the issue of how to explain when institutions structure conflict and when they are structured by it, leaving us without a clear sense of how politics is structured, if at all, over time.

As a result, historical institutionalists need to rethink the basis for their longstanding claim that politics is a structured endeavor. They confront a paradox of plasticity. The problem becomes one of explaining how institutions that are to some extent plastic can nonetheless contribute to the structuring of the political world.

INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL COALITIONS

As I see it, the key to resolving this problem lies in taking seriously another of the central insights in this second wave of historical institutionalism, namely, its insistence on seeing institutions as the product of social coalitions. The core propositions are that

institutions are created by social coalitions composed of actors powerful in the relevant arena and persist only as long as they retain an ample supporting coalition, even if the composition of that coalition changes over time. This contention appears in Swenson's (2001) studies of industrial relations and social policymaking and Thelen's (2004) path-breaking work on systems for skill formation. A coalitional perspective on institutions may seem uncontroversial. As a statement about the conditions underpinning institutional persistence and change, however, it stands in contrast to prominent alternatives attributing the durability of institutions to taken-for-granted logics of appropriateness or to the equilibrium qualities of institutions that promote coordination (cf. March and Olsen 1989; Calvert 1995; Thelen 2004, ch. 1)

This coalitional perspective directs our attention to the problem of how new social coalitions are formed. Although an old problem in political studies, this is one about which we have relatively few general theories. But careful consideration of it reveals dimensions of politics that address the paradox of plasticity.

At a basic level, the formation of new coalitions must involve a process in which multiple actors reinterpret their interests in ways that allow them to join together behind a common project and then assemble the power resources necessary to ensure that the views of the coalition are addressed (Offe and Wiesenthal 1986). How do actors reach a new set of views about their interests? To this question, some accounts cite shifts in material circumstances, on the assumption that actors are motivated by perceptions of economic interest that emerge from changes in the material world. Where this is correct, understanding the formation of new coalitions is easy.

However, as even Karl Marx acknowledged, perceptions of interest rarely arise unambiguously from the world. They emerge from processes of interpretation. Thus, such barebones accounts typically understate the difficulties confronting those who want to form a new coalition sufficiently powerful to implement major institutional changes. In most cases, discontent with existing institutions has to reach certain levels. Actors have to be convinced they should abandon procedures with which they are familiar to enter uncertain territory. They have to develop new interpretations of their circumstances, agree that specific types of reforms are likely to address their problems, find ways of proceeding collectively and assemble the relevant power resources. Sometimes, they have to be persuaded to enter costly contests for power.

In other words, even within a delimited arena of policymaking, the process whereby a new coalition forms behind important institutional changes is far from mechanical. A wide range of factors have to line up and many of these, including the availability of certain ways of thinking about policy, the presence of particular economic conditions or an increase in the salience of certain issues, will be features of a particular conjuncture rather than durable features of the political setting. To borrow a term from Ragin (1989), the process whereby new coalitions pushing for major institutional changes are formed entails "multiple conjunctural causation"—an image that conforms well to empirical accounts of the processes of coalition formation that produced institutional change in multiple realms, ranging from the reform of health care to the reversal of economic policies (Skocpol 1979; Starr 1984; Immergut 1992; Hall 1993).

Several implications follow from this view of major institutional change as the product of coalition formation in contexts of multiple conjunctural causation. The first is that institutional changes analogous to the episodes of “reform” described by Thelen (2004) are likely to take place in concentrated bursts at particular conjunctures. Small-scale institutional change marked by “defection from below” or “reform from above” may well be continuous in most domains, but major institutional changes are likely to require exceptional circumstances, because change of this magnitude depends on coalitions that are especially difficult to build. They cannot be constructed at all points in time.

The second implication is that conjunctures of major institutional change are likely to be characterized by a particular kind of politics, intrinsically more open than usual and driven by a number of factors not always prominent in the determination of political outcomes. Several scholars have made such observations. Swidler (1986) notes, for instance, that ideology often becomes more important in unsettled moments, when standard “strategies for action” have been discredited. Sewell (2005) sees a role in such contexts for “transformative events” that act as catalysts for the -scale change in worldviews and institutions. Some scholars of American politics have described the politics of “critical realignment” as divergent from those of normal politics (Burnham 1971; cf. Mayhew 2002).

Note that there are some differences between this perspective and older views that associate institutional change with “critical junctures” in which the institutions across multiple spheres change in tandem, as they sometimes do following major wars, revolution or when nation-states are formed. The conjunctures I describe are rarely so “critical” and often limited to a single policy domain. This is not a “big bang” theory suggesting that many political institutions often change together (cf. Orren and Skowronek 2004). It posits conjunctures less sweeping in scope but still transformative in specific domains of politics.

There are some appealing features to this view. There is a robust role for agency in the process, since institutional reform is seen as the product of actors who join together for that purpose, and this approach accommodates the possibility that some actors may be prime movers in coalition formation, while others play supporting roles (Korpi 2006). Moreover, this perspective reveals how the political imagination of a particular era can leave its mark on history, as the institutions that emerge from the worldviews and context for decision-making at a particular conjuncture go on to structure practices in subsequent periods.

This perspective also directs our attention to the ways in which the incremental institutional changes that take place during periods of stability can condition the timing of critical junctures and the course of events during them. As Thelen (2004) has observed, growing discontent with an institution may lead to “defection” from its practices, giving rise to changes in its operation that precipitate a conjuncture of coalition-building on behalf of more concerted reforms. The character of reform at such junctures may also be conditioned by the kinds of incremental institutional change that precede them. Morrison (2011) argues, for instance, that key features of the 1832 British Reform Act

were made possible by gradual changes in the institutional arrangements regulating relations between Parliament and the Crown.

In short, while moving away from the radical disjunctions posited by theories of critical junctures, this perspective still sees history as a syncopated process, divided into conjunctures when concerted efforts are made to put important new institutional frameworks in place and periods in which those frameworks provide a relatively stable structure for politics or policymaking.³ The timing and pace at which such conjunctures appear will vary across institutional fields, but there is a role for conjuncture in the creation of structures. Moreover, by stressing the coalitional underpinnings of institutions, we lay the groundwork for more nuanced analyses of how the politics of stability conditions what happens during junctures of concerted reform.

EXPLAINING STABILITY

How, then, are periods of relative institutional stability to be explained? This question takes us back to the paradox of plasticity. If institutions are creatures of coalitions rather than the residues of economic or ideological circumstances, the answer must turn on why the coalition on which an institution depends might remain relatively stable over some period of time. Why might coalitional politics be more orderly in some periods than at others?

That issue, in turn, invites us to consider how institutions and coalitions might be mutually reinforcing. The core point is that, although created by social or political coalitions, many institutions have features that help to consolidate the very coalitions that keep them in place. Indeed, this may be one of the most important ways in which institutions structure politics. Of course, some institutions are more stable than others, and the mechanisms consolidating support can vary across institutional fields; but the literature points to five mechanisms whereby institutions sustain the coalitions on which their own existence depends.

The first is based on the benefits a new set of institutions provides. A social program that confers benefits on a particular class of recipients is the paradigmatic case, although analogous processes pertain to many kinds of taxing, spending, and regulatory regimes. As Pierson (2004) notes, actors may come to see those benefits as entitlements. Thus, the benefits that accrue from an institution and the shifts in worldview about social justice that often accompany them can underpin institutions (Hall 2015). Reinforcing this mechanism is a general feature of human behavior. As Kahneman and Tversky (1979) report, people are typically more concerned about losing something they already have than about gaining something they do not yet have, even if the latter is of greater value. That helps explain why actors offered another policy promising even larger benefits may not switch their allegiances as often as a simple interest-based calculus might suggest (Fioretos 2011). Mechanisms based on entitlement are likely to operate most powerfully

in contexts where institutions deliver a substantial set of visible and well-defined benefits.

A second follows from the levels of uncertainty usually present about what outcomes will flow from institutional reform. Uncertainty in “instrumental beliefs” about what effects will follow from a change of policy may lead actors to hesitate before shifting their support away from existing arrangements whose impact is well known (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). As Shepsle (1989) notes, where the issue is whether to endorse new procedures for making decisions, this “wedge of uncertainty” is likely to be even greater. Even if actors can see an immediate gain from changing those procedures, they can rarely anticipate fully how other matters will be treated under them and thus whether procedural change will benefit them in the long term. Mechanisms based on uncertainty are likely to be especially important to sustaining institutions in technically complex policy areas or where the decision rules that confer power over the allocation of resources are at stake (Blyth 2007).

A third set of mechanisms turns on how institutions distribute power. As Moe (2005) observes, many institutions do not simply resolve collective action problems—they also distribute power in ways that privilege the social coalition that put them in place (Knight 1992). Institutional arrangements dictating who has jurisdiction over a topic, the composition of agendas, or the decision-rules used to resolve issues can all bias decision-making in directions that privilege the coalition that created those institutions (Marshall and Weingast 1988). Although legislators elected via one set of rules sometimes alter them, they do so rarely and not usually to their own disadvantage. Existing institutions often also limit the power resources available to actors likely to challenge them. Political institutions responsive to the affluent, for instance, may reduce the power of trade unions or alter rules in such a way as to discourage political participation by those on low incomes (Gilens 2012). Mechanisms that distribute power underpin many of the institutions distributing economic resources in society.

As Pierson (2004) has noted, a fourth set of mechanisms flow from the network or coordination effects generated by institutions. Institutions such as policy regimes often induce actors to make investments in new kinds of assets or behaviors in order to secure the benefits offered by the institution. To take advantage of a regulatory regime, for instance, firms may invest in particular endeavors. Citizens may invest in certain sets of skills to take advantage of available production regimes or adjust their saving for retirement in light of existing tax policies. Where it is costly to change such investments, these actors are likely to provide continuing support for the institutional arrangements that induced them. Mechanisms based on these kinds of coordination effects operate with special force in the political economy, where actors often make substantial investments or resources based on existing regulatory regimes and institutional structures.

A fifth mechanism turns on the potential for institutional complementarities (Hall and Soskice 2001). The level of benefits actors derive from a set of institutions governing some endeavors can depend on the presence of institutions governing other sets of endeavors. In such cases, actors will join a coalition dedicated to changing one set of institutions only if they can anticipate that a successful coalition can also be formed to

make corresponding changes in another institutional arena. Even when that first coalition is feasible, the other may be difficult to construct, either because it entails mobilizing actors without a stake in the first arena or because conditions in other arenas continue to make existing institutions attractive there. Thus, institutional complementarities often act as impediments to institutional reform. This mechanism can be found both in the polity and in the economy. Swenson (2001) argues that institutional arrangements in industrial relations affected the willingness of Swedish and American employers to support reforms to social policy. Goyer (2006) finds that efforts to reform corporate governance in France and Germany turned on variations in the character of labor relations in each country, while Büthe and Mattli (2011) argue that a government's posture toward the institutions governing international standards depends on its domestic institutions for standard-setting.

In sum, there are a variety of ways in which institutions can consolidate the coalitions on which their existence depends. Together, these mechanisms help to explain why, despite a certain amount of continuous institutional adjustment, it still makes sense to see the political world as one characterized by periods of considerable institutional stability punctuated by conjunctures of more intense contestation and institutional change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF POLITICS

The primary objective of this chapter is to encourage scholars to cultivate a greater sensitivity to the overarching models of politics that lie behind their analyses. Instead of thinking about political explanation as a matter of identifying a short list of variables that might impinge on an outcome, we should also be thinking about how these variables interact with one other within specific contexts to form distinctive patterns of politics across space and time. Rather than treating key features of the institutions, cognitive frameworks, and network relations that structure politics as background factors whose effects wash out across cases, we should take seriously the possibility that they may be conditioning the relevant outcomes.

This perspective does not militate against the use of statistical methods for testing propositions about politics. However, it suggests estimations should be used more creatively with an eye to interaction and period effects. In many instances, it may be useful to move beyond fixed effects estimations toward multilevel hierarchical models and to take care when specifying the time-lags associated with causal factors. The effects of some may show up only over long periods of time, while others may acquire causal force only after they reach certain thresholds (Abbott 1988; Huber and Stephens 2001; Pierson 2004).

By the same token, we should be cautious about the conclusions that can be drawn from experimental methods. In some instances, such methods allow the analyst to isolate the impact of a key causal factor. But the effects revealed by an experiment occur within a specific situational context that may not generalize to all times and places.

Cross-cultural experimentation can sometimes capture contextual effects. However, many kinds of experiments direct our attention away from the macro-level factors structuring politics toward models that ascribe political outcomes to behavioral traits which, when taken as universal determinants of action, tend to read the effects of structural context out of politics (Deaton 2010; Woolcock 2013).

To understand the syncopation of politics, we also need to think more systematically about the pace at which conjunctures of reform occur and what precipitates them. By moving beyond models focused on critical junctures of very large-scale change, we can consider temporal syncopation of more subtle types. We also know what to look for if we see institutions as the products of social or political coalitions. We should be developing further theories about why coalitions form or break apart and considering why the incremental adjustments that sustain such coalitions occur in some cases but not others. In part, this can be an inquiry about how actors acquire and sustain “strategic capacities.”⁴

Similarly, it may be possible to discern differences between the types of politics found during periods of relative institutional stability and unsettled conjunctures, based on how the politics of coalition formation varies across each kind of period. That entails developing a longitudinal perspective on issues that are often considered in purely cross-sectional terms (Lieberman 2001; Pierson 2004; Capoccia and Keleman 2007). For this purpose, it can be revealing to look at contemporary politics through the lens of political development. Following Thelen (2004) and Capoccia and Ziblatt (2010), we might see some outcomes as products of the institutional or ideological structures put in place by a succession of episodes, which appear, not as blips on the radar screen of history, but as moments when the political imagination of particular times and places is etched into longer-term processes of political development.

In short, to see politics as a process structured across space and time brings history back into political science, as an active process unfolding over time rather than simply as the terrain on which to find another set of cases (Pierson 2004; Katznelson 2003; Haydu 1998). This perspective does not mean political scientists have to become historians. The search is still for fruitful generalizations, notably about the factors conditioning the formation of coalitions and institutional or ideological development. However, the result can be deeper and more realistic models of politics.

NOTES

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1. Whether such effects are consistent over time can be assessed using conventional statistical techniques, but often they are not. Fixed effects specifications can control for the impact of country-specific factors on the outcome, but do not automatically evaluate the impact of country-specific factors on the impact of other causal variables.
2. In principle, actors can be endowed with other kinds of fundamental preferences, including ones that are not material, but, in practice, relatively few political scientists assume such preferences.
3. Note that a conjuncture is defined here by the effort to assemble a new coalition behind major institutional reforms as compared to views that define a conjuncture as “a period of significant change” (Collier and Collier 1991, 29).
4. David Soskice has long emphasized the importance of “strategic capacity” in such contexts.

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