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978-0-521-13432-3 - Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power

Edited by James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen

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Explaining Institutional Change

Ambiguity, Agency, and Power

This book contributes to emerging debates in political science and sociology on institutional change. Its introductory essay proposes a new framework for analyzing incremental change that is grounded in a power-distributional view of institutions and that emphasizes ongoing struggles within but also over prevailing institutional arrangements. Five empirical essays then bring the general theory to life by evaluating its causal propositions in the context of sustained analyses of specific instances of incremental change. These essays range widely across substantive topics and across times and places, including cases from the United States, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The book closes with a chapter reflecting on the possibilities for productive exchange in the analysis of change among scholars associated with different theoretical approaches to institutions.

James Mahoney is the Fitzgerald Professor of Economic History and a professor of political science and sociology at Northwestern University. He is the author of *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America* (2001), which received the Barrington Moore Jr. Prize of the Comparative and Historical Section of the American Sociological Association. He is also coeditor of *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), which received the Giovanni Sartori Book Award of the Qualitative Methods Section of the American Political Science Association. His most recent book is *Colonialism and Postcolonial Development: Spanish America in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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Preface

Until recently, gradual institutional change has not been a central focus of explanation in the social sciences. Instead, most institutional analysts have considered change during moments of abrupt, wholesale transformation. Yet it is not clear that such episodes of institutional upheaval capture the most common ways through which political institutions change over time. A growing body of work suggests that important changes often take place incrementally and through seemingly small adjustments that can, however, cumulate into significant institutional transformation. These forms of gradual institutional change call for more attention than they have received so far.

The present volume seeks to respond to this call. In the introduction, we propose a theory of gradual institutional change grounded in a power-distributional view of institutions that emphasizes ongoing struggles within but also over prevailing institutional arrangements. On this view, analyses of stability and change are intimately linked. Institutional stability is a function not simply of positive feedback but of active, ongoing political mobilization, and institutions are vulnerable to change not just in moments of crisis but on a more ongoing basis. Features of the overarching context and the properties of the institutions themselves hold the key to understanding the processes through which such change can be accomplished. We emphasize in particular that institutional rules are subject to varying interpretations and levels of enforcement and therefore exhibit ambiguities that provide space for interested agents to exploit in their effort to alter them. We use

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these orientations to develop causal propositions about the connections among particular types of institutions, strategies for change, and modes of gradual institutional transformation.

The five empirical essays that follow the introduction bring these propositions to life in the context of sustained analyses of specific instances of incremental change. These chapters span a wide spectrum of substantive topics and political contexts. The authors examine instances of institutional change in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America as well as in the United States, and they consider changes in diverse institutions, from the rules governing the conduct of business within the U.S. Congress to the system of property rights in postcolonial Kenya. Even as they develop their own insights about the specific cases under study, the authors also apply and elaborate the general theoretical framework presented in the introduction.

Our point of departure for thinking about institutional change builds on insights coming out of a body of work broadly associated, as we are, with historical institutionalism. However, the theory we develop in this book, and the specific propositions we lay out, can be fruitfully taken up by scholars associated with any of the various “isms” in institutional analysis. In this spirit, the book concludes with an essay by Peter A. Hall reflecting on the possibilities for productive exchange in the analysis of change between historical-institutionalist scholars and scholars associated with rational-choice and sociological approaches to institutions.

It is our great pleasure to be able now to acknowledge formally those individuals and organizations that made this book possible. This volume grew out of a conference at Northwestern University in October 2007. Our largest debt is to the participants in that conference, for many of the insights contained in the pages to follow came out of the stimulating discussions we had over two days together. In conceiving the project, we sought to gather together some of the best recent work on institutional change undertaken by a new generation of institutional analysts. We are grateful to these authors, who brought fresh insights and original empirical material from their respective fields of study to provide a rich foundation for the discussion. We were also extremely fortunate to have secured the participation of a distinguished group of more senior scholars to serve as discussants at the conference.

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Anna Grzymala-Busse, Peter A. Hall, Desmond S. King, Paul Pierson, Theda Skocpol, and Sven Steinmo provided detailed comments on the individual papers but also shaped this volume (and our own thinking) through their broad commentary on the project as a whole. We thank Peter A. Hall especially for going a step further to deliver a characteristically insightful and synthetic concluding chapter to round out the volume.

We are enormously grateful to the Roberta Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies of Northwestern University for funding this conference. The Buffett Center is home to Northwestern's Program in Comparative Historical Social Science, a tight-knit group of faculty and graduate students from sociology and political science that provides the core intellectual community out of which this project grew. The center's past and current directors – Andrew Wachtel and Hendrik Spruyt – and its associate director – Brian Hanson – offered their encouragement and provided support of all varieties from the inception of the project to its completion. The center's staff, and in particular Diana Snyder, made the conference logistics easy for us.

It is always a real pleasure to work with Lewis Bateman at Cambridge University Press, who was immediately enthusiastic about this project and who oversaw the book's production with his characteristic efficiency and good humor. Finally, working together on this project has been a wonderful intellectual and personal experience for us. It gave the two of us a reason for bringing together different generations of institutional analysts and an opportunity to think together about problems of institutional change.

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