



Introduction to Political Science

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Government Structures



- Government structures are the basic things that governments need to do in order to govern.
- For example, since all governments must establish the rules of acceptable behavior within the state, every government must have a legislative structure for creating laws.
- It may take many different forms, but it will always be there.
- Because laws and decisions must be implemented, every government must have an executive or a political structure that acts on behalf of the state, etc.

Structures or Institutions?

- Structures are generic while institutions are specific.
- A legislature is a political structure, while the British House of Commons is an institution.
- A judicial system is a political structure, while the U.S. Supreme Court is a political institution.
- Political institutions are the organizational structures through which political power is exercised.



Human Nature and Political Institutions



- A society's basic view of human nature is a reasonable place to start working on a general understanding political institutions.
- As James Madison put it, "But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?"
- Madison's view on human nature was quite pessimistic and that basic perspective is abundantly clear in basic construction of U.S. political institutions.
- The framers of the American constitution built a system based on a basic mistrust of human nature.
- They created a complex set of interlocking institutions with overlapping responsibilities that pitted separate portions of the government against itself.
- Each section jealously guarded its power and the power of those that supported it and it was this pursuit of selfish interests that kept the other sections honest.

Human Nature and Political Institutions

- The U.S. system's separation of powers is specifically designed to make it difficult for the government to infringe on citizens' rights.
- It prevents bad things from happening, but it also makes it hard to get much done at all.
- Taking a more positive view of humankind, other governments are more likely to have simpler systems that make it far easier to enact policy.
- For example, in some European democracies the winning party has a much freer hand in making changes.
- The ability to more easily enact policy comes at the cost of stability over time.
- Less-restrained governments also risk putting some at the mercy of the majority as they swiftly pass laws and make sudden changes to society's rules.
- It is in the details of the local context, the worldview of the people, and geographic and economic realities that institutions are created and later evolve.



Collective Action Costs

Two kinds of costs that are especially relevant for designing and evaluating institutions are:

- **Transaction Costs** - the time, effort and resources required to make collective decisions.
- **Conformity costs** - The difference between what any one party prefers and what the collective body requires.



Transaction costs can be particularly cumbersome with a large number of people. Sometimes transaction costs are intentionally included. The framers increased the transaction costs of changing the Constitution (two-thirds the membership of both houses of congress and three-fourths of the states).

Transaction and Conformity Costs are typically inversely related.

The Reality of Political Institutions



- Given the opportunity to craft ideal governmental institutions from scratch, we would all choose institutions we believe support our most important values and traditions
- Values like democracy, individual rights, and personal freedom can all be bolstered and protected, or weakened and repressed by the types of institutions a nation uses.
- Similarly, the personal wealth, power, and security of the leader are other values that can be bolstered or impeded by particular types of institutions.
- Given the personal nature of utopias and the variety of the people found in every governed society and the push for compromise quickly takes us away from anyone's ideal institutions.

Context, Evolution, and the Unbearable Weight of History



- Nations rarely have an opportunity to install their ideal institutions from scratch.
- Most government institutions are not designed or even intentionally created; they tend to evolve.
- Even when institutions are rationally and intentionally designed, nations seldom, if ever, have anything close to a blank page when they start creating a government.
- Almost every government's institutions carry the legacy of generations.

Context, Evolution, and the Unbearable Weight of History

- Even revolutions may not lead to dramatic changes in institutions.
- A nation's structures may have been imposed upon it by another source.
- Newly independent colonies often started with political institutions created by their former colonial masters.
- Even if a nation could plan its structures, it is not necessarily true that that which is planned will work as intended in the end.
- Government institutions are shaped by history, culture, necessity, and circumstance.
- They are always imperfect.



Failed Institutions



- Regardless of intentions, statements, and constitutions, institutions are not always what they appear to be, and they may not serve their original purposes.
- Institutions can be hijacked by those with less than noble intentions.
- Things can go horribly wrong.

Legitimacy, Information, and Human Nature

- Institutions can enhance the voluntary acceptance of decisions, policies, choices, or even the leadership as a whole.
- Governmental institutions can teach and shape public demands as much as they react to the public's wishes or enact policy.
- The types of institutions we utilize can shape our basic behavior in our day-to-day lives.
- Governments demanding citizen participation also demand that citizens be more aware.
- Governments acting paternally are likely to breed citizens dependent on strong leadership.
- Institutions that hunt down and punish dissent will generate fear, isolation, and atomization.

Choosing Institutions: Picking a Terrain



- The structures that are put into place will be affected by the basic political culture.
- According to Sidney Verba, a nation's political culture is comprised of "the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values, which defines the situation in which political action takes place."
- This political culture can involve religious values, expectations, morals, ethics, and traditions.

Choosing Institutions: Selecting a Basic Form

- Aristotle identified six basic types of government.
- He noted three *good* forms and three *perverted* forms.
- If the government worked for the benefit of all of its citizens, Aristotle called it good.
- If it benefited only the ruling class, Aristotle labeled it a perverted type.
- The other major distinction Aristotle drew among the governments was the size of the group in charge.
- A nation led by one person could be either a monarchy (good form) or a dictatorship (perverted form).
- A government ruled by a few could be either an aristocracy (good form) or an oligarchy (perverted form).
- A government led by the many could be either a polity (good form) or a democracy (bad form).



Choosing Institutions: Selecting a Basic Form

- In Aristotle's day democracy was synonymous with mob rule, that is, everyone acting in her or his own best interest with little or no regard for the community.
- Some countries that have monarchs do not actually give them much power.
- A country that does not have a monarch is, according to one very basic definition, a republic.
- Aristocracy is actually a common feature of democratic governments, e.g., constitutional courts.
- Democracy is not the only alternative to monarchy and aristocracy; there are mixed systems.
- Those countries that many think of as democracies also have some very undemocratic elements involved with them.



Choosing Institutions: Connect Your Government

- There are essentially three systems through which the relationship can be ordered; the unitary system, the federal system, and the confederal system.
- Most nations don't *choose* to have one or the other.
- The makeup of the nation, its history, its culture, and its geography tends to determine the type of structure.
- A *unitary system* is one where sovereignty rests quite clearly on the shoulders of the national government.
- Laws apply to everyone regardless of where they live in the country, everyone shares all governmental benefits equally, and there is no redundancy in services.
- The central national government may allow some local governing boards to have a say.
- The ability to make these decisions is at the mercy of the national government.



Choosing Institutions: Connect Your Government

- Systems where the final authority for at least some aspects of government is left to the local or subnational level are called federal systems.
- In a *federal system* sovereignty is, at least theoretically, shared between the national and the local government units.
- Federal systems work well in diverse countries, where variations in local conditions, economies, or cultures make it impractical or inefficient to try to impose a single system, or make it difficult to make decisions from a central location.



Choosing Institutions: Connect Your Government



- The least commonly used form is the confederal system.
- In a confederal system the local government units that have the real power; they have sovereignty.
- The key to the confederal system is that the individual units within it can defy the national or galactic level of government.
- They can even leave the system at any time they wish.
- Because the national government must maintain the continued willingness of all local units to be a part of the confederation, every single local unit effectively has the power to veto any national level policy.

Choosing Institutions: Connect Your Government

- In reality, nations opt for either a federal or unitary system.
- Each system has its benefits and its drawbacks.
- Federal systems are more appropriate in large countries and with countries that have geographically diverse populations.
- Federalism allows for differences among the local government units that can reflect differing cultures or traditions.
- Federal systems also:
 - are more appropriate for large countries that want democratic systems; people are more likely to have a noticeable influence on their representatives in smaller units.
 - allow local governments to act as laboratories for the trial of policies before they are used at the national level.
 - offer citizens more choices about the governmental institutions that fit them best.
 - Citizens can theoretically choose the local government they would like to live in and move there.
 - fit in well in capitalist countries, because both people and *businesses* have the capacity to move; local governments must compete to keep people and jobs within their borders.

Choosing Institutions: Connect Your Government

- Unitary systems also have their benefits.
- In unitary systems the governmental structure is much easier to understand.
- Citizens do not have to worry about who is responsible for carrying out policies.
- Furthermore, they do not have to worry about elections for multiple offices.
- Every citizen in the country is entitled to the same rights and benefits.
- Unitary systems make it easier to maintain a sense of national identity.
- Unitary systems tend to run more smoothly because policy is easier to implement and less effort is spent sorting out who should do what.
- Regulatory consistency across a larger entity also has economic benefits, since one product can be sold across the whole nation and efficiencies of scale can be more easily capitalized upon.



Conclusion



Questions? Concerns? Angry Rants?