Summary of the Workshop:

Institutional Change: The Origins and Evolution of Political Institutions

26-27 May 2016, Sciences Po Paris

The emergence of new institutions and institutional change constitute central questions for political science. Institutions have a profound and active role in explaining the political realities we analyze. Since institutions influence actors’ behavior, we often seek to understand their effect to ultimately understand the political phenomena we study. Given the importance of institutions the question arises why certain institutions are implemented and amended in some polities but not in others. To fully understand political institutions requires an understanding of why they were put in place and how they are changed. The two-day workshop organized in May 2016 has focused on two main questions: the emergence of institutions, and the evolution of existing institutions. Gathering around 25 researchers from all over Europe and the US, it consisted of 19 papers presented in eight panels on the following themes:

1- Evolution of legislative procedures
2- Legislatures and their origins
3- Transition and Democratization
4- Group struggles and democratization
5- State capacity and institutional development
6- Electoral rules (Strategic Choices, I)
7- Electoral rules (Open and closed lists)
8- Electoral rules (Strategic choices, II)

The papers were discussed by invited researchers (Ben Ansell, Michael Becher, and Johannes Lindvall), by the two organisers (Camille Bedock and Lucas Leemann) and researchers of the LIEPP (Emiliano Grossman, Bruno Palier, and Nicolas Sauger).

The papers covered a wide range of topics, often offering a strong historical perspective on the birth and evolution of political institutions: legislative procedures, processes of democratization, state building, informal networks of governance, health care, and different dimensions of electoral rules. The workshop also showed the diversity of methods used to analyze institutional change, ranging from statistical analyses, formal modeling, to interviews and process tracing,
sometimes used in combination. Most of the papers relied on new datasets often covering very long periods of time and focusing not only on the Western European democracies, but also on Latin America or India. Finally, the participants relied on a variety of theories using insights from political economy – used for instance to understand democratization or state capacity development, comparative politics, new institutionalism, or theories about electoral system change. Overall, this workshop illustrates the dynamic nature of this research and the variety of research questions that can be answered under the generic banner of “institutional change”.

1- Evolution of legislative procedures

The first paper, entitled “The Politics of Parliamentary Speech – Regulating Legislative Debate in the UK House of Commons 1811-1945” was presented by Niels Goet (University of Oxford). Focusing on the historical development of the rules for plenary debates on bills in the UK House of Commons, the paper investigates the reasons why MPs accept limits to their rights. Thanks to a dataset on the reform of standing orders covering a 135 year period (1811-1945) and to records of over 1.2 million speeches, the paper shows that MPs are more likely to pass restrictive rules when their policy preferences are clustered along party lines on opposite sides of the median legislator. Empirically, the paper proposes a new measure of the polarization in the House of commons. More generally, it provides important conclusions to understand parliamentary reform in a context of low party discipline.

The second paper, by Alexandra Cirone (LSE) and Brenda Van Coppenolle (Leiden University), entitled “Cabinets, Committees and Careers in 19th Century France” focuses on the role of parliamentary committees in the professionalization of the political class in new democracies. Using the case of France, the inquiry takes advantage of a semi-natural experiment in the Chamber of Deputies during the Third Republic (1870-1940), namely random assignment in the committee election process. It estimates the effect of committee membership on the electoral and legislative fortunes of deputies, and demonstrate that obtaining a place on the budget committee greatly increases the chance to obtain a ministerial position, but also that it has no effect on future party leadership or reelection. More generally, the paper contributes to the study of endogenous legislative institutions thanks to a unique quasi-experimental design.

2- Legislatures and their origins

The first paper, “The Institutions of Parliamentarism: Organizing Executive-Legislative Relations” was presented by José Antonio Cheibub (University of Illinois), Shane Martin (University of Essex), and Bjorn Erik Rasch (University of Oslo). Focusing on the origins of parliamentary regimes and on their variety, the paper provides an overview of the core institutions of parliamentarism and of the general trends occurring since parliamentary regimes emerged in the 19th century. It shows that there is a clear trend toward the constitutionalization of practices initially emerging as the result of strategic interactions between the government and the parliament. Secondly, there is a general trend toward the protection of the executive against fleeting or negative majorities or toward making it procedurally more costly to oppose the government.

The second paper, presented by Alexander Baturo (DCU) and co-written with Robert Elgie (DCU) is entitled “Explaining The Selection And Survival Of Bicameralism In Non-Democracies”. The two authors focus on the existence of second chambers in nascent
democracies, semi-authoritarian regimes and non-democratic countries, in order to understand why they create and abolish second chambers. Based on a unique dataset on second chambers from 1945 to 2012, they show that in non-democracies, second chambers are not created or maintained as a result of social diversity, but that they tend to be manipulated to limit reflection when incumbent authoritarian leaders fear that their control over the lower house may be lost. They are also introduced or abolished to mask other institutional changes that are necessary for the regime’s survival in office.

3- Transition and Democratization

The paper of Andrew Coe (University of Southern California) entitled “Modern Economic Democracy” develops a formal model in order to understand the prospects of democratic transition depending on the underlying economic conflicts of interest among powerful domestic groups. The paper shows that it is when the economy is sensitive and well-integrated internally (a modern economy) that domestic groups have less severe conflicts of interest and that concentrated power becomes a source of inefficiency. This theoretical argument can account for why democracy only became prevalent recently and why autocracies were so dominant previously, while also offering an explanation for why democracy does not lead the poor to expropriate the rich.

The second paper by Leandro de Magalhaes (University of Bristol) is entitled “Wars and the Transition away from Absolutism”. Relying on a formal model and on a self-compiled data set on parliamentary activity and major battles in England, France, Portugal and Spain from 1200 to 1790, the paper investigates the link between war and rule by parliament. It shows that there is a tradeoff between the King and the commercial elite during war, and that only certain types of wars (i.e. territorial battles threatening the leadership of the King) affect the likelihood of holding a parliament in a given year.

4- Group struggles and Democratization

“The Birth of the Health Care State” is a paper by Ben Ansell (University of Oxford) and Johaness Lindvall (University of Lund), examining the development of three important public health programs: midwifery services, mental health care, and vaccination programs between the beginning of the 19th century until the Second World War. The paper provides an account of the origins of these programs showing that states began to provide health care services early on, sometimes as early as the 18th century. Secondly, the two authors provide an explanation for the cross-country variation in how health care services were governed, concentrating on three dimensions: centralization, secularization and subsidization.

The second paper by Sirianne Dahlum, Tore Wig, and Carl Henrik Knutsen (University of Oslo) is entitled “Empirically Revisiting the Origins of Social Revolution”. Relying on prominent theories about the social composition leading to revolutions, the authors test in a large-N framework with data for the period 1900-2012 the effect of social origins on democratic revolutions. They find that social movements dominated by the industrial workers or urban middle classes are more conducive of democratization than other social movements.
5- State Capacity and International Development

The paper of Didac Queralt (IPEG, Barcelona), “The Legacy of War on Fiscal Capacity”, investigates the effect of premodern warfare on long-term fiscal capacity, focusing on two types of war financing instruments: taxes and loans. Building on data covering the period from 1816 to 1913, the paper shows that tax-financed wars exert lasting effects on state capacity, contrary to loan-financed wars. Moreover, countries fighting wars while international lending was temporarily impossible have a higher fiscal capacity today. This provides extremely strong support for theories of taxation that root it emergence in periods of war. It is an echo from Tilly’s famous claim that states make war and war makes states.

The second paper by Jennifer Larson (NYU) is entitled “Cheating Because They Can: The Role of Networks in Informal Governance”. Focusing on settlers in “boomtowns” on the American Western frontier, and therefore on self-governing communities, the paper shows through a formal model how peripheral network positions can generate such strong incentives to misbehave that persistent cheating becomes an equilibrium. Moreover, cooperative groups facing shocks to their strategic environment can ratchet into less cooperative equilibria in which the most peripheral become ostracized. Finally, population change featuring rapid growth, high turnover and enclave settlements can undermine cooperation.

6- Electoral rules (Strategic Choices, I)

Pedro Riera (University Carlos III, Madrid) presented a paper entitled “The more things change, the more they stay the same”: The determinants of electoral reforms in the intraparty dimension. It focuses on the tendency to move away from party-centeredness in electoral systems and on the process of increasing personalization of electoral rules. Employing a new dataset including electoral reforms between 1945 and 2010 in sixty democratic countries, the paper investigates the determinants motivating changes in the intraparty dimension of electoral systems. The main result is that overall dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in a given country is very important for explaining electoral reform in the intraparty dimension, and specifically movements towards rules generating more incentives to cultivate a personal vote.

7- Electoral rules (Open and closed lists)

“Choosing electoral systems: Theory and evidence from a PR system with both open and closed lists” is a paper co-written by Dominik Hangartner (LSE), Nelson Ruiz-Guarin (LSE), and Janne Tukiainen (VATT Institute for Economic Research). Taking advantage of the particular PR system of Columbia, leaving parties the choice to use open or closed lists, the authors investigate how parties choose list types and how this choices influences in turn political selection. After presenting a game-theoretic model of list choice, they show empirically through a candidate level panel data of 1,100 Columbian municipalities for the period 2003-2015 and through interviews of local politicians that open lists bring more votes and lead to higher quality politicians being elected, as they incentivize candidates to campaign harder. On the other hand, closed lists are used as a strategy of party cohesion, particularly in districts with a low literacy rate and by leftist parties.

The paper co-written by Susan Achury, Margarita Ramirez, and Francisco Cantu (University of Houston), entitled “Endogenous Ballot Structures: the Selection of Open and Closed Lists in Colombia’s Legislative Elections” studies the incentive for political parties to personalize
electoral competition. Analyzing the choices of parties over the ballot structure using the same Columbian case as the previous paper and relying on original data, the authors show that parties are more likely to choose open lists in high-magnitude districts and where they have a strong local electoral organization. They also show that personalistic parties are more likely to favour closed lists.

8- Electoral rules (Strategic choices, II)

The paper of Sukriti Issar (OSC, Sciences po Paris) and Matthias Dilling (University of Oxford) entitled “The Role of Failed, Fumbled or Foiled Plans in Institutional Change” deals with the role of failed attempts of institutional change. Building on the literature of endogenous institutional change, the paper shows that failed attempts can prove essential for subsequent modifications by laying the necessary ideational, coalitional, and legal groundwork leading to actual change. Using the examples of changed in internal party structure in 1960s Italy, and the adoption of an incentive-based urban planning in Mumbai in the 1980s, the two authors show how failed attempts have helped to circulate new ideas and contributed to the change of the balance of powers.

The paper “The Institutional and Strategic Origin of Compulsory Voting in Historical Democracies”, co-written by Ria Ivandic and Ruben Ruiz-Rufino (KCL), investigates the conditions explaining the adoption of Compulsory Voting (CV). It argues that the adoption of CV is a strategic choice and a response to the extension of suffrage: as such, it can be considered as part of an institutional bundle. Using a historical panel dataset covering parliamentary and presidential elections from 1880 to 2008 in Western and Latin American democracies, the authors demonstrate that CV is an answer of established parties to the under-mobilization of their voters relative to the voters of the left, favored by universal suffrage.