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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Evaluation of Democracy Research Group

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Camille Bedock is a researcher and lecturer temporarily attached to Sciences Po Bordeaux. She completed her PhD at the European University Institute under the supervision of Sven Steinmo (EUI) and Nicolas Sauger (CEE/LIEPP). Camille is specialised in comparative politics and works on institutional and electoral reforms as well as political parties.

Lucas LEEMANN



Lucas Leemann is Lecturer in Quantitative Political Science and member of the Q-Step Centre. He joined UCL in August 2014 after completing a PhD at Columbia University. His research targets two disciplinary subfields: Comparative Politics and Quantitative Methodology. In Comparative Politics the main focus is on direct democratic institutions and institutional origins. In Quantitative Methodology he is interested in both measurement (IRT, MrP) and modeling (mostly hierarchical).

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 workshop will have two parts, which structure the contributions. The first one focuses directly on the emergence of institutions and the second one concentrates on how existing institutions evolve and are changed.

The State of the Art on Institutional Change

For the last decade, comparative politics has returned to the origins of institutions. Giants in our field, such as Rokkan and Moore, have already provided a first set of explanations to how certain institutions emerged, but comparative politics then lost interest. A testimony of this is found e.g. in Steinmo and Thelen (1992) when they say that "although arguably one of the most important issues in comparative politics, [the question of institutional formation and change] has received little attention in most of the literature to date" (1992, 15). But recently this has changed again and the question of where the institutions originated and under which circumstances they evolved has returned into the focus of mainstream comparative politics. Capoccia and Ziblatt (2010) argue with respect to the study of democratization that "The collective "return to history" reflects a growing appreciation among political scientists of the conclusions that can be drawn from the history of democratization and of the constraints imposed by history on the prospects of democratization. Furthermore, though history may not be a laboratory, it can help solve enduring problems of causality and endogeneity that plague standard ahistorical approaches." (2010: 932).

The study of the emergence of institutions and institutional change has already produced a plethora of insights, whether it is about new electoral systems being implemented in the 1990s, the genesis of proportional representation in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, the emergence and consolidation of new political regimes in the aftermath of the last wave of democratization, or the incremental changes to existing institutions. The employed methodologies vary strongly from case studies, to large N statistical analyses, to mixed methods. But they all share the objective to understand how certain important institutions come into existence and change over time. The concepts and the theories mobilized are at least as diverse as the methodologies. Some analyses of institutional change have been based on an economic or rational choice perspective in which power considerations are paramount, others have used a constructivist approach in which ideas and values are put forward, others still have used a Rokkanian perspective centered on national trajectories and on unique country configurations.

Workshop entitled, « New Perspectives on Institutional Change » May 26th -27th 2016 at Sciences Po, Paris

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Session 1: How do new Institutions Emerge?

In this first part, we focus on particular moments and on key periods where new institutions are generated and adopted. This can be a key moment such as the period of regime change where many institutions are changed at once but it also covers singular changes where e.g. income taxation is introduced, or a federalism reform is implemented. Conceptually relevant is the idea of punctuated equilibrium, where one expects a profound and sudden change following long periods of stability, the notion of national trajectory that insists on the unique character of each national configuration when institutions are put in place, or the premise of rational actors or "transition". Do certain configurations of actors and certain factors foster the emergence of new institutions? How important are ideas, national history, and values of the reformers in these processes?

Session 2: How do institutions evolve and get reformed?

When put in place, institutions are remarkably enduring and able to survive many challenges, so much that their evolution and the reforms following their implementation tend to be overlooked by institutional analysts. Indeed, they tend to focus mostly on the consequences of reform or on the emergence of the institution. Nevertheless, even without being fully replaced, institutions are constantly adapted and reformed. A starting point to this endeavor is provided by Thelen, Mahoney and Streeck who have developed typologies of institutional change. How do institutions evolve after they have been put in place? Can they be reformed to overcome inefficiencies and unintended negative consequences? One of the challenges which arises in this line of inquiry is how to disentangle the change of the formal rules and the change of the informal practices, behavior, and values. These two sessions hoped to contribute to these questions.