

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Lecture 2: Analytic Foundations
February 7, 2013

Outline

1 Collective Goods and Collective Action

2 Institutions

3 Power

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Life in the State of Nature

“What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?” – James Madison, *Federalist* No. 51

- **Thought experiment:** What would life be like in a “**state of nature**,” with no government or other social institutions?
- **Hobbes:** “Without a common power to keep them all in awe,” men are “in a condition [of] **war**, as of **every man against every man**.”
 - **Logic:** All would be better off in peace, but can't trust others to disarm, and anyone who unilaterally renounces violence will be exploited by (rational) others.
 - Life is “**solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short**”
 - Powerful ruler (“Leviathan”) needed to maintain peace & law

Hobbes's State of Nature as Prisoner's Dilemma

	P₂ Cooperates	P₂ Fights
P₁ Cooperates	Peace (2, 2)	P ₂ Exploits P ₁ (4, 1)
P₁ Fights	P ₁ Exploits P ₂ (1, 4)	War (3, 3)

P₁'s Ranking:

- 1 P₁ Exploits P₂
- 2 Peace
- 3 War
- 4 P₂ Exploits P₁

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Peace is **Pareto optimal** (no outcome makes everyone better off), but **War** is the unique **equilibrium** (no rational incentive for individual to change strategy).

Collective Action Problems

The prisoner's dilemma is a type of **collective action problem**: a situation in which **individually rational** strategies yield a **socially suboptimal** outcome.

- Collective action problems typically involve **public or collective goods**, which are enjoyed by all in group, regardless of whether they contribute to their provision:
 - Peace (Hobbes), high prices (Olson), common pasture (Hardin), clean water (Ostrom), social capital (Putnam)
- Tend to be **underprovided and overused**
- Effect of each actor unusually stark in prisoner's dilemma

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Institutions

Institutions are **stable social structures or patterns** that influence and organize human activity—“humanly devised constraints on action” (Douglass North).

- **Formal:** organizations, rules, laws, regulations, . . .
- **Informal:** norms, beliefs, ideologies, social networks, . . .

Institutions, Coercion, and Cooperation

By foreclosing certain options, institutions can open up others:

coercion → cooperation

- Punish bad behavior (“Leviathan” or hired “whip”)
 - Compulsory contribution (taxes, military service)
 - Regulation of use (restrict access to commons)
- Reward good behavior
 - Privatize commons (state still in background)
 - Tie incentives to performance (agency relationships)
- Repeated play, small groups → reputation → enforcement
- Norms and expectations (how much grazing is too much?)

Formal and informal institutions are often **complementary**.

Coordination and Path Dependence

- Sometimes there are **many possible institutional equilibria**, so the problem is which one to **coordinate** on:
 - Right or left side of the road (arbitrary but important)
 - QWERTY (original purpose no longer exists—inefficient)
- Cost of switching from one institutional equilibrium to another can be prohibitively high and increasing over time → **path dependence**, even if inefficient (see QWERTY)
- Reflect and reinforce **power** dynamics present at creation
- **Key Point:** Institutions do not simply facilitate voluntary cooperation. They **benefit some people at the expense of others**.

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The Three Dimensions of Power

Gaventa argues that power has three dimensions or “faces.” What does he mean by each dimension? What are some examples of this kind of power? How would we observe it in action?

The First Dimension of Power

Definition: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”

Examples: Town meeting, roll-call vote, labor negotiation

Measurement: Observe “who participates, who gains and loses, and who prevails In decision-making.”

The Second Dimension of Power

Definition: Influence over who gets to participate and what issues/alternatives get considered

Examples: Agenda control, voter eligibility, anticipated reaction

Measurement: What are the potential issues/alternatives?
Investigate “non-decisions” and “non-events.”

The Third Dimension of Power

Definition: “When A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests”, perhaps by “influencing, shaping or determining his very wants.”

Examples: Myths, ideology, beliefs, apathy, acceptance of inferiority or legitimacy of existing order

Measurement: May be directly observable (e.g., control of media) but often not → requires careful consideration of **interests** as opposed to **preferences**

Federalism Through the Lens of the Faces of Power

The three dimensions of power reinforce each other, often through the mechanism of specific institutional structure.

Example: **federalism**

- **1st dimension:** Constitutional Convention of 1787
- **2nd dimension:** Prospects for constitutional change
- **3rd dimension:** Ideological legitimacy of federalism

Recap

- Strategic, self-interested actors often face high barriers to achieving collective goods through cooperation.
- Institutions, often backed by coercion, make cooperation easier, but they also benefit some at the expense of others (power) → cooperation in order to coerce.
- Institutions tend to reinforce the power of those who created them, and to persist far beyond the reasons for their creation.

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Spring 2013

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