
Rethinking Political Institutions

The Art of the State

EDITED BY

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New York University Press

NEW YORK AND LONDON

2006

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When Does Politics Create Policy? *The Organizational Politics of Change*

Margaret Weir

E. E. Schattschneider's observation that "new government policy creates new politics" has provided the inspiration for much of the most compelling work on policymaking.¹ In recent years, historical institutionalists concerned with explaining broad and enduring patterns of public policy have built on Schattschneider's implicitly historical and institutional perspective. Rather than treat each policy battle as one in which all alternatives are equally plausible, these accounts show that conflicts over policy are structured by the interests and institutions created by earlier decisions. This past confers advantages on some policies even as it rules others out of serious consideration. The historical institutional approach to policy is, as many have noted, especially useful in explaining broad patterns of continuity and in accounting for persistent variations across different political systems. It is less helpful when we seek to explain discontinuities because it offers few tools for analyzing how established policies lose support and how new policy directions take hold.

Historical institutionalists have addressed these problems in two main ways: by elaborating theories about institutional dissonance and by developing analyses of elite political strategies. In this chapter, I argue that what is missing in these approaches is attention to the organizational substructure of politics, particularly to processes of interest definition and coalition building among nonelite actors. In democratic political systems, institutional dissonance offers opportunities for social movements and policy entrepreneurs to promote change; likewise, elite political strategies require acceptance—or at least acquiescence—from below if they are to be

successful. Explanations of policy persistence and change must account for the actions and inactions of nonelite actors.

The best way to do this, I argue, is to treat these actors as potentially complex organizational entities, themselves embedded in multiple institutional networks.² By recognizing that some actors are themselves organizations, this approach draws attention to the internal processes through which organizational actors define their policy interests. By recognizing that actors may define their interests in relation to multiple institutions, it shows how changes in the patterns or possibilities of support in any one policy arena may be conditional on developments in ostensibly distant domains. The first half of the chapter examines the problem of explaining policy change in historical institutionalism, showing how an actor-centered institutionalism contributes to understanding change. The second part of the essay illustrates these ideas by examining processes of interest definition and alliance building in two organizations whose support has been central to the defense of social welfare programs in the United States: the AARP, the organization dedicated to promoting the interests of the elderly, and the AFL-CIO, the central body of organized labor.

Policy Change in Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalist analyses of policy development have focused our attention on the forces that promote continuity in policymaking. Such concepts as policy legacies and path dependence provide a powerful correction to the implicit behavioralist assumption that each decision constitutes a new roll of the interest-group dice.³ Instead, historical institutionalists argue, policies create new constituencies whose very existence transforms future politics. Further developments of this perspective posit connections among clusters of institutions. At their most coherent, such complementary institutions may constitute a regime. This picture of policymaking is much more structured by past decisions than a behavioral approach would suggest. As such, the historical institutional approach has considerably advanced our thinking about the forces that account for stable configurations of policy and the self-reinforcing cycles of change within those configurations.⁴

Historical institutionalism is less well equipped to explain policy changes that do not follow this reinforcing logic. The most common explanation for such changes points to critical junctures or crises in which

normal constraints are lifted and new unexpected policy directions become possible. Yet, as Kathleen Thelen has argued, explanations that rely on critical junctures often overestimate the indeterminacy of crisis periods and underestimate the ongoing changes that occur in noncrisis periods.⁵ Increasingly, as Paul Pierson has pointed out, analysts of public policy need to explain such endogenous incremental change, in part because the cumulative effects of such changes can have much broader repercussions.⁶

One of the central problems with critical-junctures explanations is that they fail to illuminate the mechanisms that keep institutions in place during noncrisis periods.⁷ Instead, there is an implicit assumption that, once locked into place, institutions reproduce themselves. Yet, the normal course of socioeconomic changes poses ongoing challenges for all institutions. Gosta Esping-Andersen, for example, notes that socioeconomic change in the postwar decades confronted welfare states with the challenge of capturing the growing middle class whose needs were not met by existing programs.⁸ Economic and demographic changes create possibilities for making new arguments about the suitability of existing policies and to make the case for alternatives. Only in a static world would policy be immune to such dynamics.

Historical institutionalists have taken two approaches to explaining different patterns of change, both of which seek to make room for agency in the context of institutional stickiness. The first, developed by Orren and Skowronek, points to institutional dissonance as a source of change. They argue that, "at any given time, institutions, both individually and collectively, juxtapose different logics of political order, each with their own temporal underpinnings." Instead of a single "political order," they portray a more disorderly politics in which institutions "abrade against each other and, in the process, drive further change."⁹ In this analysis, institutions may operate relatively independently of one another and are less tightly linked than in the regime and path-dependence literature. Such abrasions create space in the political system for actors to promote change. Elisabeth Clemens presents a similar image of discordant elements coinciding in time, and she emphasizes the role that actors situated in different domains play in driving change. In her analysis, it is "the friction generated by actions that bridge domains organized on different principles . . . may disrupt routine processes of social reproduction and give rise to transformation."¹⁰ Actors that do not fit neatly into prevailing structures are most likely to promote change as they seek to make politics address their interests.¹¹

A second strand of historical institutionalism has sought to explain change by delineating the strategies of political elites. Building on Orren and Skowronek's idea of the coexistence of multiple institutions with different logics, Eric Schickler portrays congressional reform as a process of "layering" in which reformers do not abolish older institutions but rather place new institutions on top of the old.¹² This strategy effects change while avoiding the political challenge of dismantling existing institutions. Thelen extends this idea, showing how layering and conversion—using an old institution to serve new purposes—serve as mechanisms that powerful actors can use to transform old institutions to serve new purposes.¹³ Her work shows how institutional persistence can be compatible with far-reaching change in the policies and practices that those institutions support. Likewise, by highlighting mechanisms of change, Thelen directs attention to strategies that agents can use to overcome institutional constraints.

Jacob Hacker takes a similar approach in his elaboration of strategies that political elites can use to roll back welfare-state policies.¹⁴ Welfare-state policies, he notes, have been portrayed as particularly resistant to change because straightforward policy revision is too politically difficult, for all of the reasons historical institutionalists would predict, including entrenched constituencies. Instead, proponents of change use three less visible strategies to effect change: layering, conversion, and policy drift. Drift refers to the failure to adapt existing policies so that they can address new socioeconomic changes. Hacker stresses that drift, which is often viewed as an apolitical process, may be politically mediated: The decisions not to adapt policy so as to be more responsive can be traced to deliberate political intent. Hacker shows how each strategy is suited to particular political settings.

The emphasis on institutional dissonance and agency in this work illuminates how significant policy change can occur even when existing policies and institutions are exhibiting precisely the change-resistant effects that institutionalists would expect. Acknowledging that multiple forces with distinct trajectories are operating at any one time makes it easier to understand the emergence of new tensions and opportunities for policy change. The elaboration of strategies that eschew outright revision but that nonetheless effect dramatic changes on the ground shows how powerful actors can work around institutional barriers to change. Yet, the focus on elites illuminates only the one side of the coin; the success of elite strategies ultimately depends on the insulation from, acquiescence of, or

defeat of opponents. As Hacker notes, in the more subterranean politics of drift, layering, and conversion, the activities and power of organized groups, such as unions, take on much more importance than in cases of established policies that enjoy strong support. To understand the prospects for policy change thus requires attention to the strategies of nonelites, as well as to those of elite actors.¹⁵ How do such groups respond to challenges to policies that benefit their members? How do they attempt to build power to influence policy?

The Politics of Interests and Coalitions

Answering these questions requires the insights of institutionalism to analyze how organized interests define their policy preferences and how they identify alliance partners. A return to pluralist and behavioral strategies of explanation, in which actors' interests are whatever they say they are, simplifies the task of identifying actor interests but loses the insight that institutions—preexisting ties and commitments—help to pattern the definition of policy interests and allies. There are regularities and continuities not easily captured by pluralists.

These regularities are, however, far from immutable. In complex institutional environments, actors may have multiple identities, and they may define their interests in multiple ways.¹⁶ On questions of public policy, preferences are especially malleable since there is much room for persuasion and reassessment about which policy truly matches a group's interest. Thus, established interest definitions and ties are subject to renegotiation. Such renegotiations are especially likely in political environments that challenge existing policies either directly or indirectly. When the actors are themselves organizations, it is crucial to open the black box of organizational structure and decision making to understand how groups define their interests and identify potential allies.

Conceiving of actors as potentially having multiple interests requires taking into account the organizational dynamics through which actor interests are defined and the multiple institutional networks in which actors are embedded. Actors define their policy interests in two distinct institutional settings: (1) internally, inside organizations where organizational actors contend over what policies best serve the interests of the organization; and (2) externally, at the intersection of the multiple institutional networks within which they are embedded. Both perspectives are

necessary for understanding the possibilities for interest shifts among actors and, consequently, for understanding how coalition support for policy is built and how it may unravel.

The political dynamics that occur within organizations—the relationship of leaders to members and the possibilities for competing factions within the organization—may determine how organizations define the policy interests of their members. Proposed reforms can set off internal struggles over the true interests of the membership or the organization; conflict between the interests of the organization and the interests of the membership may also arise. Michels's iron law of oligarchy suggests that over time the interests of the leaders will inevitably become more conservative than those of the membership.¹⁷ But other organizational dynamics may also promote change. Members may be more independent than Michels's perspective implies. Challengers internal to organizations may promote new perspectives on the organization's interest as part of their bid for power. They may also need to introduce new organizational structures to institutionalize their view of the organization's interest. When there are competing factions within an organization and the effects of policy are uncertain, particular perspectives may be championed because of the internal organizational advantages they confer rather than because of any rationally determined match with member interests.¹⁸ Such internal dynamics are especially important for assessing the durability of policy change.

External ties are important because, as actors define their policy interests, they are also defining their relationship to other actors. Many policies persist because they are supported by "constellations of actors" that are brought together in specific institutional contexts.¹⁹ When decisions about policy changes emerge, these actors are negotiating not only about policy but also about their power relationships with one another. Analyses of policy change must accordingly consider the power relationships among actors. How much do actors need one another to achieve their goals? Are there alternative alliances through which they can achieve their goals? How free are actors to leave an existing alliance? Shifts in actor relations may arise from new opportunities for alliances or from the diminished need for existing allies.

This organizational perspective recognizes that actor relationships are institutionally structured but maintains that they are structured not only by the institutions organizing a single policy area; they are shaped by rela-

tionships in multiple policy domains. For these reasons, it is important to recognize that actors may be embedded in multiple networks. As Peter Hall notes, "most people have multiple interests, often associated with the multiple roles they play in the world, some of which conflict with each other, and many of which are subject to multiple interpretations."²⁰ A strong alliance of interests in one policy area may not be matched by similarly shared perspectives in other areas. Such conflicting ties are the place to look for potential changes in preferences and for possibilities for new group alliances. Similarly, the rise of policy alternatives may pull groups away from a favored policy, just as the waning benefits of some alliances may provoke interest in alternatives.

Internal organizational dynamics and alliance conflicts that promote change are especially likely in environments where institutions are not tightly linked. When institutions exhibit diverse political logics, it is more likely that actors will be embedded in diverse networks and that competitors that seek to displace established policies will emerge. Likewise, when there is significant competition among policy alternatives, there is greater chance that existing constellations of support can become unstuck and that internal challengers will propose alternative definitions of organizational interests. In this way, policy shifts may emerge from changes that are peripheral to the policy in question.²¹ By creating alternative policies, such changes create new possibilities that actors embedded in multiple networks will reevaluate their interest definitions. Just as the concept of regimes and the search for complementarities helps explain stability, institutional and policy diversity helps explain change.²²

This approach suggests that our assessments of policy change must take into account the definition and redefinition of policy interests. Moreover, this process can occur internally within organizations and externally through relationships to other organizational actors. Interest redefinition may mean a reassessment of an actor's fundamental goals, but it can also be a less dramatic shift in judgment about which policies promote enduring goals. Critical junctures direct our attention to the rise of new interests or new actors, but such occasions when the slate is clear are rare. The approach outlined here offers insights into redefinitions of interest and recombinations of actors that promote policy change under less dramatic circumstances. As such, it puts political contestation within and between organizations at the center of institutional approaches to policy change.

Interests, Alliances, and Policy

These ideas can be illustrated by examining how the AARP and organized labor, two organizations central to the viability of liberal social policies in the United States, reacted to a political environment that challenged the foundation of the American welfare state. These cases demonstrate how organizations shape the way societal groups define their policy interests and show how calculations about alliances affect organizational policy positions.

Institutional Dissonance and the Effort to Overhaul Social Security

The effort to introduce private accounts and benefit cuts into Social Security, which took off after George W. Bush's reelection in 2004, illustrates how institutional dissonance made the direct effort at rolling back what was once called the "third rail of politics" politically plausible. The battle over Social Security shows how the availability and promotion of policy alternatives can threaten even the strongest of policies. As a long-established pension policy, the Social Security system was less vulnerable to challenge than newer pension policies.²³ The pay-as-you-go financing mechanism for the existing system also made a transition to private alternatives very expensive and hence difficult to achieve. Moreover, Social Security was the paradigmatic case of policy fostering new politics by creating new constituencies. Andrea Campbell has shown how Social Security not only built support among the elderly but also spurred them to become unusually politically active.²⁴

Yet, even in this case, the potential for undermining support for Social Security was apparent. The creation of tax-subsidized individual retirement accounts in the 1970s and their dramatic growth in the 1990s created potential competition for Social Security.²⁵ The elderly and near-elderly who receive or expect to receive Social Security payments may also be stock market investors, benefitting from investments in their individual plans. As members of this alternative public-private policy network, these beneficiaries enjoyed an alternative source of information about the advantages of various retirement schemes. In the 1990s, the investment industry launched a concerted effort to undermine Social Security, issuing regular warnings about the unreliability of Social Security benefits and promising much greater security in a fully privatized system. The exis-

tence of private alternatives and the pressure for privatization created ominous new fissures in the once-solid support for Social Security among the elderly. The divisions fell along the class lines, with the affluent more likely to support privatization and low-income seniors most opposed.²⁶ Exaggerated warnings about the future insolvency of Social Security for more than a decade also created stronger support for private accounts among younger workers, providing another possible base of support for change.

As this case suggests, the existence of competing policy alternatives that fracture a base of solid support for existing policies or that mobilize new voices is a significant mechanism for promoting change. Such alternatives are most likely to appear in policy systems that exhibit multiple organizational logics. This is certainly true of the American welfare state, which has long been characterized by the existence of private systems of security designed to supplement public programs.²⁷ As Jennifer Klein shows in her history of the public-private benefit system in the United States, when the federal government embraced security as central public goal in the 1930s, businesses did not withdraw from providing private benefits. Rather, the insurance industry found new ways to supplement federal programs, continuing to make security a profit-making business for the private sector.²⁸

Although the final chapter of this battle remains to be written, the AARP, the main advocacy group for the elderly, acted much as historical institutionalists would predict, challenging the effort to establish private accounts and joining in a broad coalition with other groups to defeat the Bush administration's proposals. Despite support from other groups claiming to represent the elderly—groups created by the advocates of private accounts—the voice of the elderly was expressed primarily as one opposed to the proposed changes. Moreover, the support of younger workers remained politically inert for the most part, since younger workers were not organized to inject their support into the debate. The most active group support for privatization came from business groups, most prominently the mutual fund industry, which owed much of its growth to 401(k)s and saw Social Security privatization as a means for further expansion. Whatever the outcome, the effort to restructure Social Security highlights the importance of competing alternatives as a tool for reshaping interests and pulling apart existing coalitions much as arguments about institutional dissonance would suggest. At the same time, it underscores the difficulty of launching a direct assault on an existing program with a broad constituency.

Medicare Reform: Constituency Interests versus Organizational Interests

The 2003 Medicare reform presents a very different picture, illustrating the pivotal role that organizations play in shaping definitions of policy interest. In this case, the AARP departed from its earlier resistance to change and supported a controversial reform whose benefits to seniors were sharply contested by the plan's Democratic opponents. Although the reform added a prescription drug benefit, it provided such limited coverage and imposed so many restrictions that its ultimate benefit to the elderly was doubtful. Moreover, the legislation authorized the creation of subsidized private health-care plans that defenders of Medicare charged would eventually hurt seniors by leading to the unraveling of the universal coverage.

The AARP's support for the 2003 reform can be explained only by delving into the internal processes through which the organization determined the policy interests of its members. As an officially nonpartisan organization that in 2002 derived more than 24 percent of its operating revenue from providing health insurance products to its members, the AARP had organizational prerogatives that were potentially in tension with the interests of its members.²⁹ Moreover, the organization's internal structure provided for very little member accountability. This distance from membership was reinforced in the late 1990s when new leadership centralized activities and eliminated the national delegate convention's role in selecting leadership.³⁰ Through a combined strategy of courtship and threat, congressional Republicans brought the AARP over to its side in the Medicare debate. The AARP actively campaigned for the legislation, sponsoring paid advertisements touting the plan's benefit to seniors.

In complex policy choices, such as that of reforming Medicare, organizational mediation of group interests takes on added significance. Medicare created a supportive constituency among its broad base of constituents, but organizations, not individuals, often play a key role in complex policy deliberations. The organizational interests and unaccountable internal structure of the AARP allowed it to break with former allies to support a reform of doubtful benefit to its members.

Organized Labor: Organizational Survival, Interests, and Alliances

While policy constituencies may play the decisive role in defending against headlong attacks on existing policies, the proactive power needed to com-

bat retrenchment through policy drift must come from organized interests that have a broader stake in active government and that have the power to weigh in on a range of policy debates. The ability of such organizations to address major challenges is therefore another important area of inquiry for students of policy change. Major challenges may set off controversial efforts to remake organizations so that they can exercise power in the new setting that confronts them. Organizational capacity to challenge policy drift depends on the success of such restructuring.

Contending views about the true interests of an organization come to the fore when organizations are under external challenge, especially when challenges are serious enough to threaten their survival. At such moments, fundamental questions about the organization's interests and allies emerge: Is the organization's interest equivalent to the desires of its current members, or is it best defined as the organization's ability to grow and survive? Do organizational policy positions alienate it from potential allies needed to win strength? How organizations address these questions will determine whether major policy shifts, achieved by direct or indirect means such as drift, are successful. Organizations may rise to the challenge, or they may themselves drift into insignificance.

In the United States, organized labor, despite its comparative weakness cross-nationally, has been a central force in promoting public social-welfare policies. Yet, decades of organizational decline have left labor ill equipped to address the challenges not only to major social-welfare policies but also to labor's own organizational survival. The recent efforts to transform organized labor in the United States provide a compelling example of an organization in which a major effort at rebuilding power is under way. Organized labor's steady decline over several decades left it with 13 percent of the workforce during the 1990s (10 percent of the private workforce), down from a high of 35 percent in the 1950s. In the mid-1990s, this decline propelled to labor's top echelons a new leadership with innovative ideas about how to revive labor as an organization and a political force. John Sweeney's "New Voices" leadership took over the national AFL-CIO in 1995 with the explicit aims of increasing union density and building labor's power.³¹

As the new leadership has sought to rebuild labor, it has forced to the surface once-submerged debates about labor's true interests. For the previous two decades, union leaders and members equated the organization's interests with the interests of current members, both active and retired. As the number of unionized workers declined, however, the interests that

labor represented grew ever more narrow. The defensive and narrow stance of labor in the 1970s and 1980s contrasted with its more ambitious and encompassing approach to politics and policy in earlier decades. Organized labor had once provided the political bulwark for New Deal liberalism. In federal politics, organized labor supported the emerging civil rights movement, and key elements within unions helped to fashion the War on Poverty.³² In his study of labor politics in the 1950s and 1960s, David Greenstone argues that labor political activity reflected a social democratic impulse in American politics. Union political machinery was deployed toward "strengthening the Democratic Party in campaigns and pressuring for a welfare-state orientation."³³ Labor's federally organized Committee on Political Education (COPE) complemented and substituted for Democratic Party state and local mobilizing capacities, registering and turning out voters for liberal candidates. Moreover, to promote Democratic political success, unions not only organized union members but also mobilized nonunion minorities to take on active roles in the political process and backed social policies that would benefit these groups.

The new leadership of the AFL-CIO has sought to retrieve this broader vision, seeking to rebuild the organization's power and to recast it as an organization that represents all working people. But, because labor is an organizationally complex actor, redefining interests and allies is not a simple process. At the top of the federated union structure is the AFL-CIO central office, which pronounces on policy and lobbies on behalf of labor but which has limited ability to influence what its member unions do. The national leadership cannot on its own announce new policy objectives. Member unions themselves are decentralized, with a national (in union parlance, "international") leadership and union locals that enjoy significant autonomy. Paralleling the local-international structure is a separate federated structure meant to aggregate labor's voice on a territorial basis, representing labor in local and state politics, much as the AFL-CIO national leadership does in Washington. This territorial organizational structure is composed of central labor councils, which are usually county-level organizations, and state federations. Labor's complex organizational structure means that tracking efforts at change requires examining both the internal organizational channels through which new ideas are considered and the organization's external networks, which may either spur or restrain the efforts to alter existing patterns of policy support.

Internal complexity and diverse external networks can facilitate reinterpretation of organizational interests. Diverse views are more likely to

emerge in complex organizations where different parts of the organization operate with some measure of autonomy. Likewise, members are likely to be exposed to more diverse sources of information than in more tightly controlled organizations where leadership controls access to information in order to enhance its freedom to maneuver.³⁴

One way that labor has sought to rebuild its power is by building coalitions with low-wage workers and urban minorities, including immigrants. Labor's complex organizational structure facilitated a significant shift in its policy position on illegal immigration in 2000. An initially small group of immigrant-rights activists pressed the case for change, winning the support of top leadership by linking the rights of undocumented immigrants to the goal of promoting organizing. Showing that the failure to enforce the rights of undocumented immigrants was undermining organizing in the most active service sectors, these advocates cast their issue in terms of larger organizational goals.

Labor has also sought to shore up its alliances with urban minorities. The effort to build new alliances has meant identifying policy issues on which labor could unite with other actors with which it wanted to form a broader pro-activist government alliance. Many of these concerned labor's presence in metropolitan politics. In some cases, labor pressed for new policies, such as the living-wage effort, that enhanced the political connections between labor and community-based organizations representing low-income workers.³⁵ In other cases, it has meant shifting positions or becoming active on existing issues, as in labor's support for "smart growth," involving growth limitation efforts, increased support for public transit, and support for affordable housing. Packaged together, this cluster of issues connected labor with the interests of low-income residents, minority groups, and environmentalists.

Yet, new connections are not so easy to make. In many cases, they entail disentangling labor from other ties. For example, establishing closer ties to urban minorities may challenge longstanding alliances, such as those that have linked the building-trades unions and the construction industry in local politics. Moreover, the long history of mistrust and opposed identities between many unions and urban minorities means that these new coalitions are often fragile and vulnerable to efforts to break them apart.

Despite the creative efforts to promote change, these efforts have achieved only limited success, given the complex federated structure of the AFL-CIO. Indeed, deep internal fissures may ultimately lead to the break-

ing apart of the federation as the most activist factions of labor seek the freedom to rebuild along the lines they see as most effective.

Conclusion

Historical institutionalist explanations have powerfully improved our understanding of policymaking by showing how the political terrain changes after a policy is enacted. As constituencies that benefit from the policy form to support it, interests and actors are transformed. Yet, in these analyses, the main action is from the institution or policy to society, leaving little room for agency. Consequently, such accounts do not take us very far in understanding prospects for change, apart from extraordinary critical junctures when the floodgates open and significant change is possible.

I suggest that understanding evolutionary changes requires a more precise understanding of actors. I argue for a multidimensional perspective on actors that considers internal organizational politics, as well as the multiple external networks in which actors are embedded. These settings provide the context in which actors define their policy interests and consider alternatives. Thus, actor constellations are structured by existing policies but the institutional setting is complex and multiple. This multiple situating of actors opens increased possibilities for shifting interests and constellations of power and ultimately for policy changes.

NOTES

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2. Fritz W. Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
3. For representative discussions of these issues see Margaret Weir, *Politics and Jobs: The Boundaries of Employment Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ira Katznelson, "Structure and Configuration in Comparative Politics," in *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, ed. Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zukerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81-112; Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics,"

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5. Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States and Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 1.

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10. Elisabeth S. Clemens, "Continuity and Coherence: Periodization and the Problem of Institutional Change," in *Social Time and Social Change: Perspectives on Sociology and History*, ed. Fredrik Engelstad and Ragnvald Kalleberg (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1999), 74.

11. See Elisabeth S. Clemens, *The People's Lobby* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); see the discussion in Orren and Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*, 106-107.

12. Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and the Development of the U.S. Congress* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

13. Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve*.

14. Jacob S. Hacker, "Privatizing Risk Without Privatizing the Welfare State: The Hidden Politics of Social Policy Retrenchment in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 98 (May 2004): 243-260.

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Lineages of the Rube Goldberg State

Building and Blurring Public Programs, 1900–1940

Elisabeth S. Clemens

Against strong claims for the rational or functional design of institutions, historically inclined social scientists have treated the durable configurations of governance as legacies of the past, as projects informed by highly bounded rationalities and cultural scripts, by contingent conjunctures and available coalitions. To the extent that institutions appear to "work," it is because they have been made to work by being implicated in ongoing practices or projects, by the selective erosion and elaboration of time. Yet, even against this modest claim for the surface efficacy of political institutions, many aspects of American political institutions constitute a challenge. Our arrangements of governance appear infused not with the spirit of the Enlightenment but with the humor of Rube Goldberg; after releasing a marble that tips a lever that lifts a plug, a stream of water moves a pingpong ball from A to B. Unlike the clean geometry of checks and balances in constitutional design, the facts on the ground are an immensely complex tangle of indirect incentives, cross-cutting regulations, overlapping jurisdictions, delegated responsibility, and diffuse accountability. Simply put, the modern American state is a mess.

The theoretical implications of this tangle of governance are missed if we rely on a Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy, an analytic lens that frames this complexity as either historical residue or evidence of partisan corruption. Although it is tempting to cut through this tangle with an elegant piece of simplifying analysis, the disorderliness of American governance merits attention in its own right. One possible approach emphasizes the formal limits on the authority of different political institutions and

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Theoretical implications of this tangle of governance are missed if we adopt a Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy, an analytic lens that treats complexity as either historical residue or evidence of partisan maneuver. Although it is tempting to cut through this tangle with an element of simplifying analysis, the disorderliness of American governance is attention in its own right. One possible approach emphasizes limits on the authority of different political institutions and