EXPLAINING PUBLIC POLICY

INSTITUTIONS AND THE AUTONOMY OF STATE ACTORS

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INTRODUCTION

This research project is focused on answering two questions in the field of public policy that are relevant to the Canadian context:
1. Why are certain policies enacted by governments and not others?
2. How do actors within the state acquire their policy preferences?
This project takes a neo-institutionalist approach to answering these two questions. Institutions are both structures (that is to say, patterns of stable relationships between individuals or groups) and norms, formal and informal, that influence social and political behaviour. Neo-institutionalism posits that these structures and norms shape the policy preferences of public officials and play a major role in determining which policies are implemented. This project looks at several variants of two important theories of policy formation: pluralism and state autonomy theory. It then examines different forms of neo-institutionalism and applies the most useful approach, historical institutionalism, to the debate between pluralist and state autonomy theories.

SOME DEFINITIONS

- Pluralist theories of public policy emphasize the role of societal actors in the policy process.
- State autonomy theories of public policy emphasize the role of state actors in the policy process.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Implemented policies are often the result of the preferences of public officials, rather than societal actors, being translated into authoritative actions: state actors are frequently able to enact their own preferred policies regardless of societal preferences.
2. Institutions shape the preferences of state actors both at the strategic and at the cultural level. Public officials are incentivized to pursue their own interests to the extent that these align with institutional norms of appropriate behaviour.

PLURALISM AND STATE AUTONOMY

Neo-pluralism suggests that societal actors significantly influence the policy process, but that only the most powerful and well-organized social groups will have the opportunity to do so. For example, one neo-pluralist argument suggests that business interests control economic policy in capitalist states because large businesses can impose significant costs on states that are unwelcoming. Nordlinger's state autonomy theory argues that public officials have a large array of tools at their disposal to either reshape societal preferences so that they cohere with their own (Type II state autonomy); or pursue their own policy preferences despite societal opposition (Type I state autonomy). These tools are grouped into broad strategies for each type of autonomy. For Type I, strategies include using opaque decision-making processes to reduce the effectiveness of societal actors seeking to oppose policy and threatening to remove or devalue public patronage that has been given to societal groups seeking to oppose public officials. For Type II, strategies include dissuading opposing societal actors from deploying political resources by convincing them that the policy they oppose will impose minimal costs on them and changing the societal balance of power by involving previously indifferent societal actors..

Bureaucratic politics argues that governments are structured in such a way that policy tends to be dictated by the winners of conflicts between state actors regardless of whether these winners have much societal support. State actors select their varying preferences on the basis of their position within the political structure (their membership to a given part of the bureaucracy, their position within government etc.) Bureaucratic politics adds an institutional outlook to Nordlinger's theory of state autonomy.

NEO-INSTITUTIONALISM

Historical institutionalism is the most useful neo-institutionalist approach for looking at the policy process. It captures both the ways in which institutions reshape the incentives of self-interested actors and the ways in which policy decisions become ingrained in institutional culture over time.
Significantly, historical institutionalism does not rely on the claims that (i) institutions matter because they help generate optimal outcomes for all actors involved in them; and (ii) that institutions that fail to do this eventually collapse (this view relies on some dubious metaphysical assumptions associated with neo-liberal game theory).
Historical institutionalism points out that the state is not neutral but pursues its own interests (that is to say, the interests of the most powerful groups within the state).
Because these groups control the process of policy formation and are often able to veto proposals that they dislike, societal groups have difficulty imposing their preferences on the state, especially when the preferences of state actors represent the status quo.

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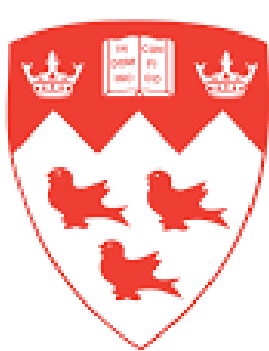
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