

What is the importance of informal institutions politics essay



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Mainstream comparative research on political institutions focuses primarily on formal rules. Yet in many contexts, informal institutions, ranging from bureaucratic and legislative norms to clientelism and patrimonialism, shape even more strongly political behavior and outcomes. People who fail to consider these informal rules of the game missed many of the most important incentives and constraints that underlie political behavior. And because Philippine politics literature has focused primarily on formal institutions, it risks missing many of the “real” incentives and constraints that determine the political nature (Manasca and Tan, 2005). Indeed, rational-choice analyses of institutions have been criticized for an excessive attention to formal rules and insufficient attention to informally established informal practices and institutions (Sidel, 1997).

Attention to informal institutions is by no means new to political science. Earlier studies of patronage politics (Magno, 1989), politicization of social cleavages (Manasca and Tan, 2005), and bossism (Sidel, 1997) highlighted the importance of unwritten rules. Nevertheless, informal rules have remained at the margins of the institutionalist turn in comparative politics. Indeed, much current literature assumes that incentives and expectations are shaped primarily, if not exclusively, by formal rules. Such a narrow focus can be problematic, for it risks missing much of what drives political behavior and can hinder efforts to explain important political phenomena.

A growing body of research on Philippine politics suggests that many “rules of the game” that structure political life are informal: created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels (Manasca and Tan, 2005). Examples abound. For decades, politics in Cebu

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has been dominated by “clans” or “dynasties” whose roots can often be traced to the emergence of commercial land-owning elite in the province in the nineteenth century. By activating networks of dependents and vote brokers, manipulating alliances with other local notables and Cebu City-based politicians, and dispensing private and public funds, these families over the years engineered the election of their scions as municipal councilors, vice-mayors, and mayors in various municipalities of Cebu province (Sidel, 1997). In Ilocos and Pangasinan, poverty and inequality have influenced the persistence of patronage politics (Magno, 1989). And in most of the provinces of the country, patterns of clientelism, corruption, and patrimonialism coexist and often subvert new democratic, market and state institutions.

The scope of comparative research on political institutions is broadened by laying the foundation for a systematic analysis of informal rules. Good institutional analysis requires rigorous attention to both formal and informal rules. Careful attention to informal institutions is critical to understanding the incentives that enable and constrain political behavior. Politics respond to a mix of formal and informal incentives, and in some instances, informal incentives trump the formal ones. During the Marcos regime, norms of corruption were more powerful than the laws of the state: the latter could be violated with impunity, while anyone who challenged the conventions of the illicit market would meet with certain punishment (Manacsá and Tan, 2005).

Consideration of informal rules is also often critical to explaining institutional outcomes. Informal structures shape the performance of formal institutions in important and often unexpected ways. For example, executive-legislative

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relations cannot always be explained strictly in terms of constitutional design. Norms permitting unregulated presidential control over provincial institutions in the country during the Marcos era often yield a degree of executive dominance that far exceeds a president's constitutional authority (Manasca and Tan, 2005).

Informal institutions also mediate the effects of electoral rules. In the area of candidate selection, studies in the Philippines suggest that because committed voters are more likely to participate in primaries, primary systems encourage the election of ideologically polarizing candidates. Yet in a context of pervasive clientelism, where primary participation is limited largely to people induced to vote by local brokers, such elections are won not by ideological candidates but by those with the largest political machine (Manasca and Tan, 2005).

Informal institutions also shape formal institutional outcomes in a less visible way: by creating or strengthening incentives to comply with formal rules. In other words, they may do the enabling and constraining that is widely attributed to formal institutions. Studies have recognized that the norms underlying formal institutions matter. The stability of the Philippines' presidential democracy is not only a product of the rules laid out in the Constitution, but is also rooted in informal rules that prevent formal checks and balances from deteriorating into severe conflict among the branches of government.

These are hardly isolated examples. Informal rules shape formal institutional outcomes in areas such as legislative politics, judicial politics, party

organization, campaign financing, regime change, public administration, and state building.

There is a need to provide a framework for incorporating informal rules into mainstream institutional analysis. Far from rejecting the literature on institutions, we seek to broaden and extend it, with the goal of refining, and ultimately strengthening, its theoretical framework. We see several areas for future research. First, we must posit and test hypotheses about how informal rules shape formal institutional outcomes. For example, how do clientelism and patronage networks mediate the effects of electoral and legislative rules? In comparative politics, the issue of how informal institutions sustain or reinforce, as opposed to undermine or distort, formal ones has not been well researched. When institutions function effectively, we often assume that the formal rules are driving political behavior. Yet in some cases, underlying informal norms do much of the enabling and constraining that we attribute to the formal rules.

Second, we need to theorize more rigorously about the emergence of informal institutions and particularly about the mechanisms through which informal rules are created, communicated, and learned. Some seemingly age-old informal institutions are in reality relatively recent reconstructions or reinventions; this fact makes the issues of origins all the more compelling.

Third, we need to better understand the sources of informal institutional stability and change. One question not addressed is that of codification of informal rules. In some instances, politics opt to legalize informal institutions

that are perceived to compete with or undermine formal rules. We need to know more about what induces politicians to formalize rather than oppose informal institutions.

Comparative politics research on informal institutions is still at an incipient stage. Advances are likely on several fronts, ranging from abstract formal modeling to ethnographic studies to survey research. New insights will come from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, economics, law, sociology, and political psychology. Hence, it is essential to promote a broad and pluralistic research agenda that encourages fertilization across disciplines, methods, and regions. Given the range of areas in which informal rules and organizations matter politically, it is essential that political scientists take the real rules of the game seriously - whether they are written into parchment or not.